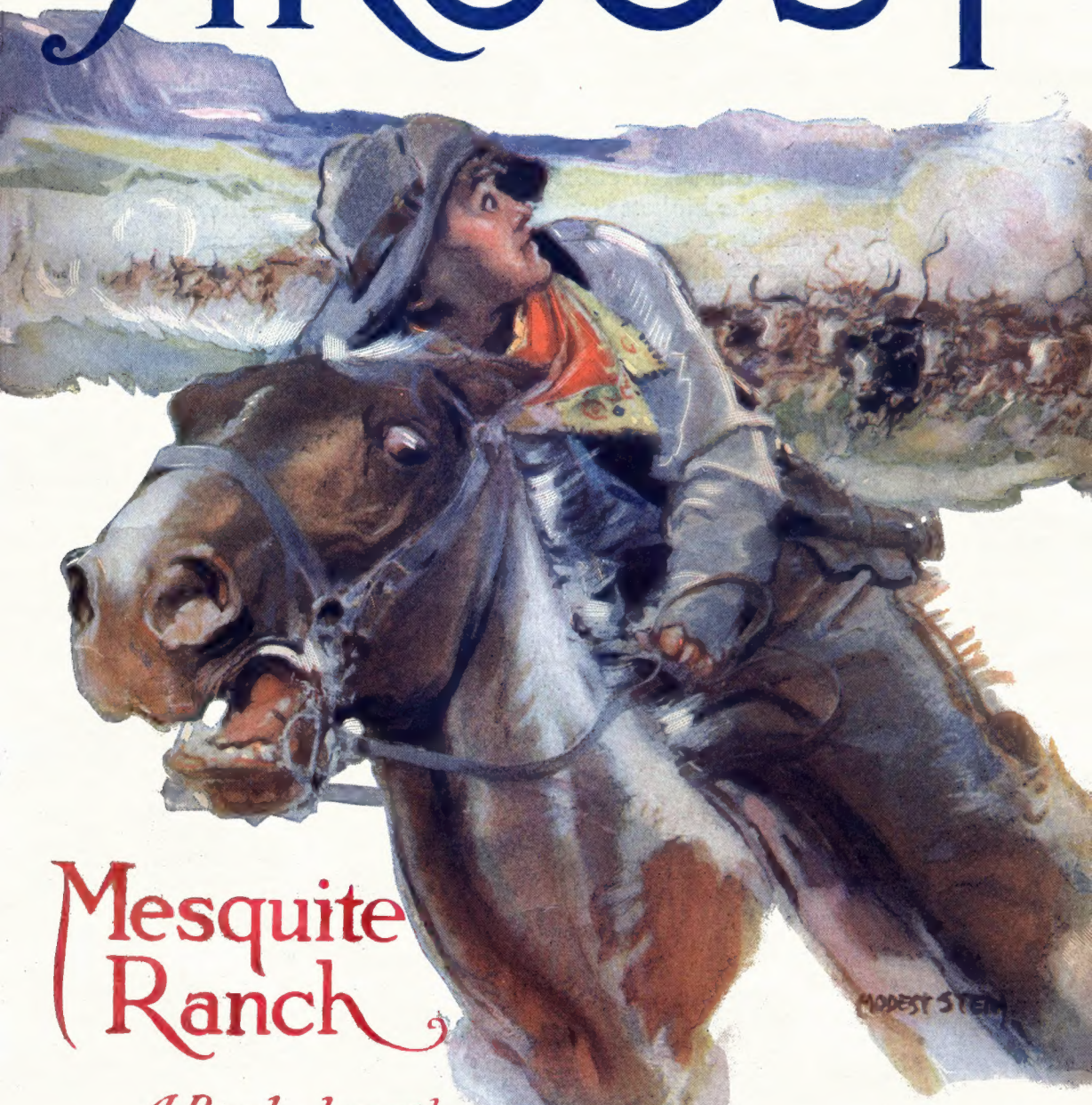
MARCH

THE ARGOSY

15 CENTS



Mesquite Ranch

A Book-length Novel by the Author of
"Taming Fierce Elton"

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

How Very Comfortable!

This is the sort of feeling that you have after a bath or a wash with Pears—a feeling of natural freshness—the exhilaration due to a sense of perfect cleanliness—the glow and delight of a healthy stimulating influence.

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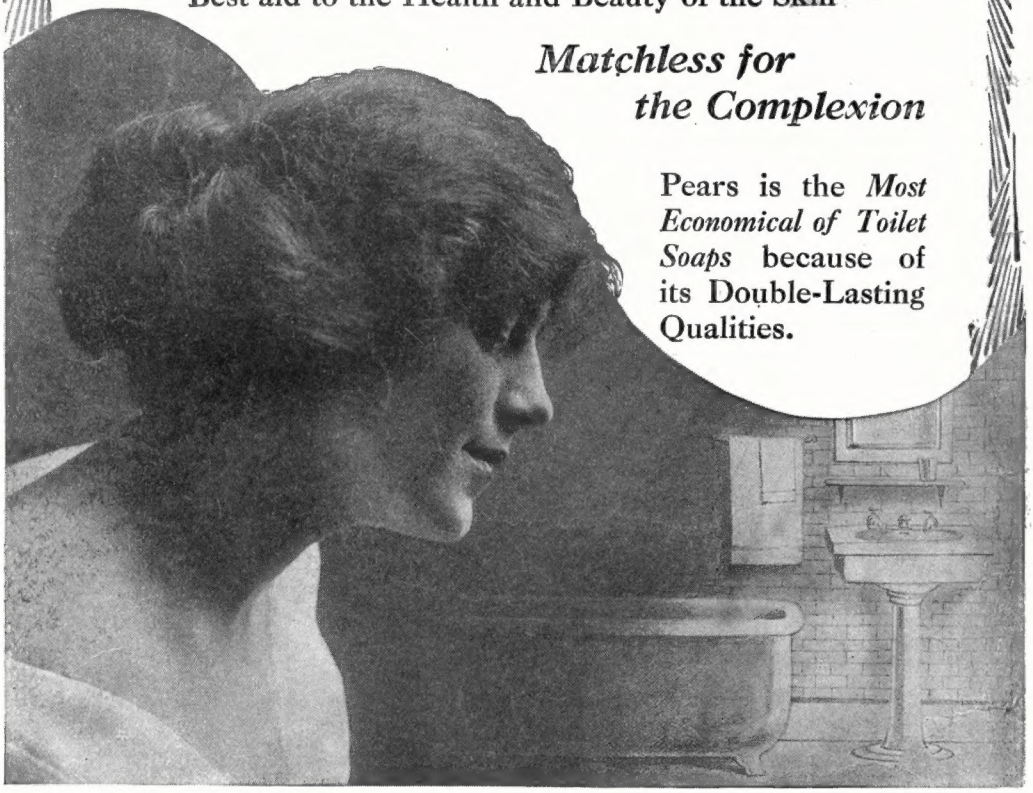
Matchless for the Complexion



Pears is the *Most Economical of Toilet Soaps* because of its Double-Lasting Qualities.

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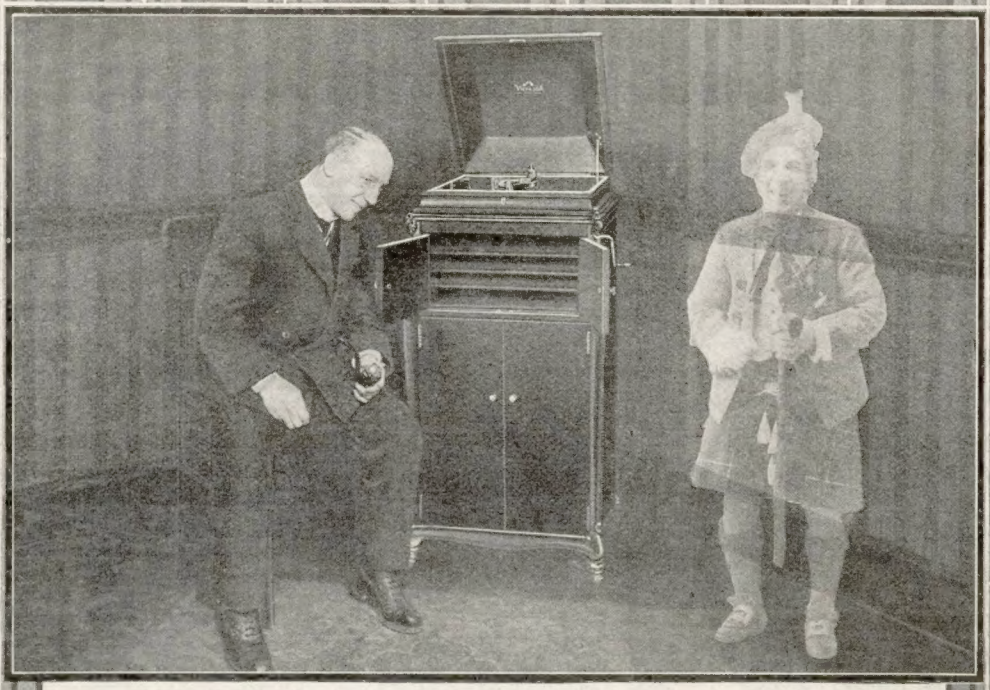
OF ALL SCENTED SOAPS PEARS' OTTO OF ROSE IS THE BEST



Harry Lauder singing to himself

"They adore me when I've got my trousers on, but they love me in my kilt".
"Rob Roy MacIntosh"—Victor Record No. 70004.

When the famous Scotch comedian wants to "hear himself as ithers hear him", he becomes his own audience of one before the Victrola.

And he hears himself just as his vast audiences hear him all over the world, just as thousands hear him on the Victor in their own homes, just as you too can hear him.

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There are Victors and Victrolas in great variety of styles from $10 to $200.

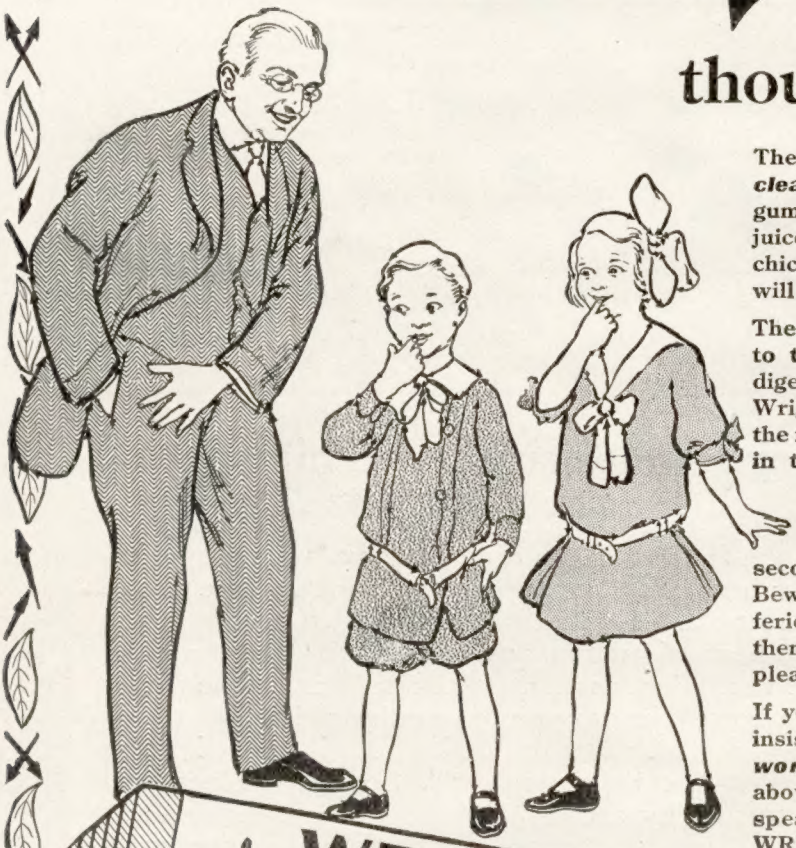
Victor Talking Machine Co., Camden, N. J., U. S. A.

Berliner Gramophone Co., Montreal, Canadian Distributors

New Victor Records demonstrated at all dealers on the 28th of each month

"Two souls with but a single thought!"

WRIGLEY'S SPEARMINT



They'll soon enjoy ***the clean, pure, healthful*** gum — real mint leaf juice — real "springy" chicle gum—because it will be WRIGLEY'S.

The delicious benefits to teeth, appetite and digestion have made Wrigley's SPEARMINT the most popular gum in the world. Imitations are being sold on the streets and in second rate stores. Beware of them! Inferior materials in them are both unpleasant and harmful.

If you want Wrigley's, insist on seeing the ***word*** "WRIGLEY'S" above the pointed spear. Be sure it's WRIGLEY'S. ***Get what you pay for.***

WRIGLEY'S SPEARMINT PEPSIN GUM

THE FLAVOR LASTS

THE FLAVOR LASTS

W. Wrigley Jr. Co. CHICAGO

BUY IT BY THE BOX
of twenty packages. It costs less —of any dealer—and stays fresh until used.

Chew it after every meal

THE ARGOSY

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ONE FULL BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE

MESQUITE RANCH.....KATHARINE EGGLESTON 721

Here is a novel of East and West, New York and the mining and ranching country of the Southwest, by the author of "Taming Fierce Elton," which was one of the most successful stories ever published in THE ARGOSY. It has all of this author's power of plotting, all her strength in character, and is laden with that peculiar sense of reality which made "Taming Fierce Elton" a story to be remembered. It has a fine mystery and love interest that is not of the same old mechanical variety—the characters in this story are ordinary every-day people in their respective environments. Here is a book for fifteen cents, and you will enjoy every line of it.

TWO COMPLETE NOVELETTES

SAILING WITH MORGAN.....GEORGE BRYDGES RODNEY 841

This is a story of forty thousand words—what would ordinarily be called a novel. It is an adventure story of the sea—the greatest sea adventures that have ever been lived. In its pages you can be with Morgan, the master pirate, and see the sack of Porto Bello and the capture of the plate-fleet. It is one of the best stories of the Spanish Main that has ever been written. The author has a fine style and he knows his facts, which he weaves into the story with great cunning.

DESERT LOOT.....JIM FELLOM 897

Again you are getting a fine story by the author of "Hairtrigger Manning," who knows his West at first hand, and wields a pen that is sure to make him famous. You will not know the end of this story until you reach the end unless you steal over into the last of it, which is a way women have. It is seventeen thousand words, and it can't be called anything but a novelette, for there is as much story element and plot to this tale as you will find in the ordinary novel.

SIX SHORT STORIES

BIG BUFFALO'S LAST BATTLE.....GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN 922

A funny Indian story by the author of "One Grand Machine for to Hear," "Sheep and Sang-Froid," and "A Forty-Four Caliber Joke." Nothing more can be said.

IN THE FLAG-SHIP'S STOKEHOLD.....JOHN MORAN 932

We get many stories of the navy by people that don't know any more about the navy than they know of weather conditions on Socootra Island. This story takes you down into the stokehold of a battle-ship with the "black gang" as the fleet is going into action. It tells more about the navy than all the recruiting circulars that ever were issued by the Navy Department.

THE PRESIDENTE'S REWARD.....FREDERICK SIMPICH 937

A tale of the Philippines that gives a fine picture of conditions there, especially the relations between American officials and natives. Simpich did considerable messing around in the Philippines and knows what he is writing about. Also he can write.

A WATCH-CHARM NOVEL.....EMERSON GRIFFITH 943

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ISSUED MONTHLY BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, and Temple House, Temple Avenue, E. C., London
FRANK A. MUNSEY, President RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Secretary CHRISTOPHER H. POPE, Treasurer
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SPECIAL THIS MONTH!

17 JEWEL ELGIN ON CREDIT

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AGENTS.—Pair Silk Hose Free. State size. Send no money. Agents wanted everywhere. New Plan. Immense profits. Beautiful line. Triplewear Mills, Dept. H5, 112 So. Thirteenth, Phila., Pa.

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AGENTS & SALESMEN WANTED

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AGENTS & SALESMEN WANTED
Continued

AGENTS—A NEW ARTICLE—PROVEN MERIT. Popular selling price—$2.00. Guaranteed to save users $5.00 to $25.00 a year. Ready sale in every home and business house. Territory open now, but going fast. Big profits. Agents enthusiastic. Particulars upon request. Act quick. Arnold Damper, Inc., No. 1, West Washington St., Goshen, Ind.

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BETTER LIGHT FOR ONE-FIFTH COST OF ELECTRICITY. Suitable for Home or Store. Easily installed; no experience necessary; big demand. Write for free catalogue. Doud Lighting Company, 175-R N. Sangamon, Chicago.

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$2.50 PER DAY SALARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMISSION paid man or woman in each town to distribute free circulars and take orders for concentrated flavorings in tubes. Ziegler Co., 445-L Dearborn Street, Chicago.

AGENTS WANTED.—BEST PAYING AGENCY PROPOSITION in United States; assures you $1500.00 yearly; inexperienced taught how to make $75.00 to $200.00 monthly. Let us show you. Novelty Cutlery Co., 77 Bar Street, Canton, Ohio.

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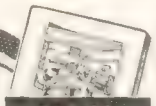

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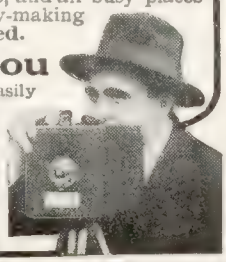

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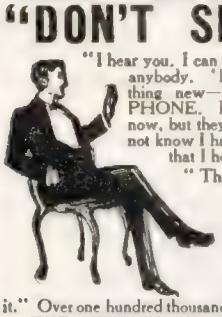

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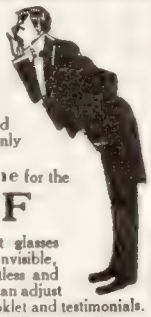

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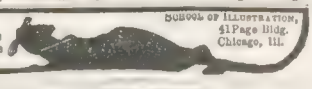

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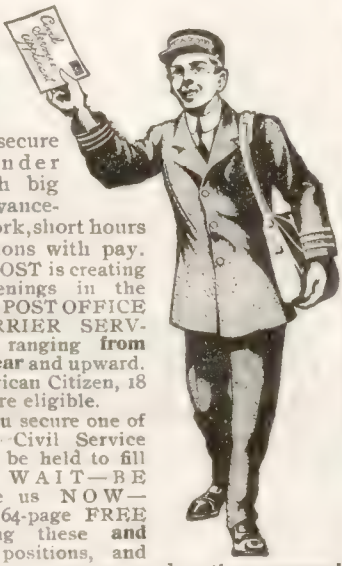

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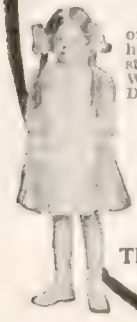

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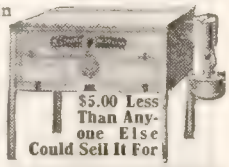

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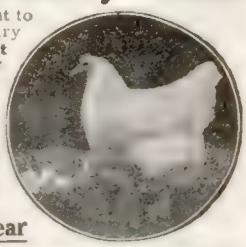

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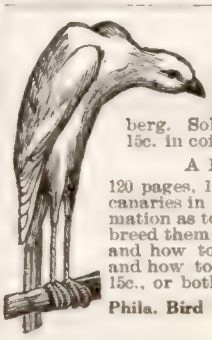

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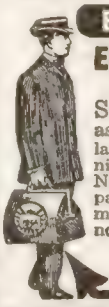

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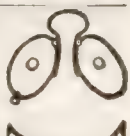

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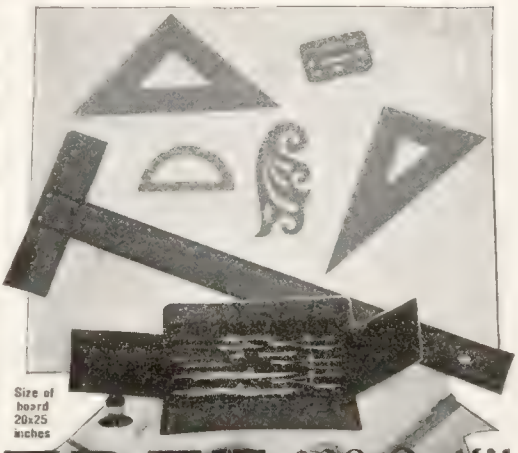

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MESQUITE RANCH

by

Katharine Eggleston

Author of "Taming Fierce Elton."

(A FULL BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE.)

CHAPTER I.

A WEDDING AND AN UNINVITED GUEST.

FREDERICK RADFORD looked from the window of the limousine toward the red-carpeted steps and got out of the car quickly.

He lifted eyes, so keen and clear and blue, to a window where a girl in white peered between the curtains, which she drew back hastily. He leaped up the steps, three at a time, and landed in the arms of a strange butler.

"Hello! What's up?" he demanded.

But the butler was engaged in getting his hat from him and thrusting a fresh pair of gray gloves in his hands.

The girl, so perfect in the appointments of her costume that her rarely beautiful face had nothing to detract from its loveliness, came hurrying into the hall. The fragrance of flowers and the sound of many low voices came with her through the door.

"Get on your gloves!" she urged.

"Bess! We're not going to be married?" Ted demanded, with a cheerful expectancy which indicated his way of taking the good things life was continually offering him.

It was the pleasantest interpretation he could put on the appearance of the house and the hasty summons that had brought him home. And he always chose the pleasantest interpretation of everything first, descending to less agreeable ones only when forced to do so.

"Come!" Bess exclaimed, slipping her hand in his arm and bending her slender figure to propel his six feet toward the drawing-room door.

Ted bent his head and whispered something about going anywhere if she went along. But Bess appeared immune to his love-making. She jerked him a bit impatiently. Ted's curiosity took the place of his sentiment. He accepted the jerk and walked with her toward the door.

Evidently somebody knew what to expect better than he did, for the doors slid back, the heavy curtains were lifted, and he and Bess entered the draw-

ing-room. Silence fell, and the perfume of flowers became more noticeable. Ted saw an altar of lilies and roses in front of him.

He could have given his college yell as a slight expression of the jubilant feeling which took possession of him. The year of waiting which was to intervene before he could marry Bess Hetherington was being docked delightfully. Probably his mother was the one who had brought about the change of heart in Bess's family. He looked about for her among the guests.

Then she entered the room from the opposite side. Ted grinned with unutterable gratitude at her as he squeezed Bess's hand against his side. But the satisfaction was short-lived. Bess withdrew her hand, and his mother took her place.

Radford blinked his blue eyes, as if a sudden and somewhat disturbing idea had hit him in the face. He glanced down at his mother. She was looking even more radiantly young and like the sister of her big son than ever. It was significant that she had discarded the blue she usually wore and was dressed in a creation that baffled Ted's masculine eyes, but still left an impression of its fitness to some extraordinary occasion.

Then a strongly built and very stern-faced man appeared from somewhere and assumed the responsibilty for his mother which Ted had unconsciously fulfilled. Without realizing it, he had led her to the altar where the strange man waited.

Uncertainty was over — and anticipation. It was his mother's marriage instead of his own. Bess had disappeared as the guests closed in about the altar. The ceremony began.

It occurred to Ted with disconcerting certainty that the wedding had been kept a secret from him purposely. He wondered why. Then he began to resent it. He and his mother were the best kind of friends. They never objected to what each did when it did not interfere with the other. If it interfered they quarreled comfortably; both decided that it really did not matter enough to make them fuss with one another, and made up pleasantly.

Bess was in on this, too. He knew from the way she acted. He recalled the silence and the speed with which the strange butler exchanged his gloves for another pair with which he was provided. It all looked as if they had anticipated an outburst from him and had resolved to get him in among the guests and right up against the altar before he got his wits and breath to protest.

If there was so much concern about his objecting, there must be some good reason for an objection. He heard the minister ask the always disregarded question about the reason that any one might know which would prevent the union. He felt tempted to exclaim that he knew no reason, but would like to hold up the ceremony to find one, as it must exist.

But he caught sight of Bess. She had moved over to one side, in line with him. Evidently she was still on the watch for his outburst. She drew her arched, black brows down threateningly. Her dusky eyes described a luminous circle over the heads of the guests. She seemed to infer that it was expected by the company that he would cut up Jack; and the frown warned him if he did he would have an accounting with her.

Radford possessed that peculiar kind of valor which goes by the name of discretion. But he exercised it almost exclusively in his relations to women. Bess could make him duck and hide, back down or brace up to anything, while a man would have had to whip him with brains or muscle to make him change — and then he might not. He was literally awed into silence while his handsome mother went on marrying a stranger.

He smiled professionally as the old and intimate friends of the family crowded past him toward his mother. He gathered that they thought she had

done something really worthy of congratulation in marrying the man who stood with such unmoved face beside his radiant bride. Ted began to like him because he refused to grin to the inanities poured over him.

But he wanted to know what it all meant. His mother's blue eyes read his. Perhaps she guessed that he had refrained from explosion about to the limit of his endurance. She beckoned to him as the guests turned toward the dining-room.

He followed her into the library and was about to shut the door when he noticed that the strange man was calmly occupying the threshold. The two of them regarded each other for a long moment before Ted faced his mother.

"What does it all mean, mother?" Ted demanded.

"Ted, this is Mr. Barrington." His mother introduced, without answering.

Radford was not enlightened. The name was unfamiliar. His sense of injustice rose and raged.

"I think you've treated me pretty shabby!" he announced with a fervor that emphasized his words.

"Don't rampage, Ted. You'll have to make the best of it. Its not really bad. Will you leave us alone, Hugo?"

Again Radford and his unexpected relative crossed glances. There was power about the look of Mr. Barrington which made him a personality. Ted saw it instantly. But he was intent upon an explanation.

"Mother, what do you—who is this man, anyway?" he asked the moment the door was securely closed.

"He's a wonderful man, Ted—a self-made millionaire!"

Radford was a man of broad experience in some ways. He knew that self-made men might be almost any kind of men. But, even though the explanation was not elucidating, the flaming blue of his mother's eyes was. It made him ask a question.

"Mother, you can't love this strange man? You ought to have told me. A woman can make a big mistake—"

"Ted, there wasn't time. It all came so suddenly. Mr. Barrington has been so devoted to me ever since I met him a month ago—"

"Great guns!" Ted exclaimed. "You don't mean that you've known him only a month?"

"I just do," his mother flashed back at him with an earnestness like his own. "But I know him to his distinction and credit. You ought to be ashamed, making all this fuss, when you are the one to benefit by—"

Radford went quickly to his mother. He put his big, strong hands on her shoulders.

"All the same, mother, you've been crying about marrying this wonderful, self-made millionaire," he accused gently.

"I haven't," she denied. "I've been crying about—about you, Ted."

"Well, forget it!" Ted exclaimed sincerely. "I was rather cut up at your stealing a march on me like this. I can't see why you did it. But I'm satisfied, if you are."

"Ted, there isn't any money," she whispered.

But the import of her words did not reach Ted. He had grown up with money like those other natural and unlimited supplies, air and water, and the idea that she meant to convey just simply did not take hold upon his mind.

"Mr. Marsh warned me over six months ago. I—I'm not much of a mother, Ted! I ought to have curtailed my own expenditures and held you down; but I—I didn't know how to begin."

Radford began to have a faint appreciation that what she was saying had some meaning to him. He stared at her for a moment, then showed that his mind had gone back to take up the novel theme where she had introduced it.

"Isn't any money for what?" he asked.

"For you! For anything! It's gone—all gone, Ted! Can't you understand?" she cried nervously.

"You mean—everything—is gone?"

he asked slowly, with a curious feeling that the foundations of his life had been removed suddenly and without his suspecting they were gone till he began to slide into an abyss. He caught at something that promised safety.

"There's this house—and the Newport place!"

"That's why I married Mr. Barrington so soon," his mother said. "They were going to take them—to settle up things, you know. I told Mr. Barrington because I was quite wild; I didn't know what else to do. He paid the debts and arranged everything. Nobody will know, Ted, that you—that you—"

Mrs. Barrington paused. She could not put into words the announcement that her independent, high-headed son was poor and a pensioner on the bounty of her husband.

Ted swallowed hard at something that rose in his throat. He stared around the luxurious room. All it contained was—Barrington's. He looked at his mother. She was Barrington's. His lip curled as he reflected that he, too, belonged to Barrington because he was dependent upon him.

"Ted, you don't blame me for marrying him? He wouldn't let me tell you because he was sure that you would make an objection to accepting anything from him. He said that after you knew him it would be easier—"

"Well, it won't!" Ted exclaimed, striding the length of the room with his hands gripped hard behind him and his face set in tense white misery.

"But, Ted, he is so rich! He has never been married. And he knows that you are everything to me! I'm sure he will do as much for you as if you were his own son," his mother said, following him and speaking with all her maternal love throbbing in her voice.

Ted felt her suffering for him. He turned with quick response toward her.

"Don't worry about me, mother. You've done the very best thing under the circumstances."

"For us both, Ted?" she asked quickly.

"For us both," he agreed, forcing himself to say what she wanted to hear, and knowing that the expression of the despair and self-reproach which seethed in him would only make her unhappy.

A maid warned Mrs. Barrington that it was time for her to dress. Ted presented a smiling front, not so much to the catastrophe which threatened to overwhelm him as to his mother and for the sake of her happiness.

But when she was out of the room he dropped into a chair as if a blow had felled him. He stared grimly at himself as his mind conjured him before the bar of his own judgment. He was ruined; and, like a coward, he was quaking and trembling at his own plight.

Already he hated Barrington simply because he was dependent on him. Against that dependence the real man in him rose and rebelled; but the self that had acquired a decorative education, that had fed on the fat of the land and reveled thoughtlessly in the luxuries he had not earned, cringed and sniveled at the loss of them all.

And there was Bess. She had been reared with the silent but plainly understood intention of making a brilliant match so constantly before her that a poor man might just as well want the moon.

In consideration for her, too, Ted dared not hope to win her; it would be too cruel to subject a girl who had never known the need of exertion nor had learned any useful thing to combat the difficulties that a poor man's wife must meet.

He thought grimly of the idiotic way in which both of them were made victims of money, for without it they were powerless. He knew Mrs. Hetherington's inordinate ambition for her beautiful daughter.

Bess was so supremely superior to any of the other girls in her loveliness and brilliant wit that Ted knew his

disabilities as a husband would merely mean a chance for any one of several men who could only envy him now.

How long he sat, trying to face the future but continually dodging from its hideousness, Radford did not realize. He heard a refined uproar in the hall. The guests were coming from luncheon. Soon his mother would come down-stairs, and he must be on hand.

He went to a mirror and beheld his own face with something like wonder. The moments that had passed might have been days, so deep and so stern was their imprint.

Again the feeling of sick disgust at his own incapacity, at his helplessness, flooded over him. He threw out his arms and tensed his big muscles, trying to convince himself that he was a man.

But his undeceived common sense was not influenced by the bravado. He was afraid of poverty and all it meant of dependence or deprivation. The white feather in his own nature flaunted itself and made him desperate and miserable.

"Ted, you must come!"

It was Bess's voice, but outraged conventions used it. She was angry with him for having failed in his duties as host, since Mr. Barrington absolutely refused to go through the ordeal of the wedding luncheon.

But Radford could think of just one thing as his eyes traveled hungrily over her. He would lose her. The alternative, the only way in which he could hope to continue as her favored suitor, was scarcely less repugnant to contemplate than her loss. He must accept the bounty that would come to him from Barrington and hope that it might be sufficient to satisfy Mrs. Hetherington's demands for her daughter.

Then, suddenly, and with the glow and lift of light and music, the thought that he might be misjudging Bess came to him. Because her mother was absolutely mercenary and ambitious and because her father quietly let his wife manage was no real reason for his believing Bess as sordid. The impulse came to him to confide in her and rest his fate with her.

"Bess, if you knew—"

"Oh, Frederick, don't talk! Come on! People are already talking. If you don't come this very instant, I sha'n't speak to you," she interrupted.

It was not an opportune moment to tell her of himself. He had already offended her god of "good form" by failing in his duties as host. He started toward the door.

Wretched and despairing as he was, the sympathy of the girl he loved would have been priceless to him. As he came toward her, Bess lifted her dark eyes with their wonderful look of slumberous tenderness to him.

Again that lump came in his throat. He reached for her. Even if the days were numbered during which he might hope to be near her, he had still the rights of a lover.

"Bess—sweetheart!" he whispered, holding her back from the door she wanted to reach. "I love you! I love you, darling!"

"Ted, don't be sentimental now. There isn't any time. Mr. Barrington will get a strange idea of you!" she exclaimed.

Ted could not have told which part of her reply disturbed him most. But anger flamed up at the mention of Barrington's name. He became more dreadfully conscious of the position he occupied toward the millionaire. If he ever won Bess, it would be because of him. And the knowledge was increasingly bitter.

He was half surprised at himself when he found that he was looking straight into Bess Hetherington's lovely face and wondering if it justified the sacrifice of his independence.

"Ted, you must be agreeable to him. Mother says it may mean a great deal to—to us."

Bess slipped through the door. Radford stood with the sharp point of the arrow she had launched unwittingly gouging into the very quick of him.

Barrington! Barrington! Barrington! He was to sell himself to Barrington. He was to smile when the rich man wished, to bow at his call. He must do it if he hoped to win what he was forced to have—money!

Ted whirled back into the room. His whole being was in arms against the conditions which confronted him. He could not bring himself to play the farce out, there among the curious and eager guests.

Suddenly the door at the other end of the big room opened. Ted started as if he anticipated a summons to the torment that awaited him. He opened his lips to refuse to make his appearance, then stopped and stared.

A man had entered the room alone. He was tall and gaunt and different in every way—except that he was human, though at the moment he scarcely seemed that—from the elegant guests and the trim servants.

Ted continued to regard him with undiminished curiosity. But the curiosity deepened to horror as the man staggered toward him.

A face so emaciated that the big bones almost stuck through the ghastly skin, eyes that burned with the fires of fever and of rage, trembling hands that made menacing if futile gestures, lank limbs that wavered uncertainly even under the light burden of the lean body—altogether a startlingly disagreeable intruder the man seemed.

"What do you want?" Ted asked, after the long pause in which he had shaken off the uncanny impression produced by the stranger.

The man came toward Radford with an abortive effort at speech which convulsed his features till he was hideous. He raised his arm, and Ted instinctively stepped backward.

Almost, as if he meant to strike but restrained himself suddenly when his interest was diverted by the rack on the desk, filled with paper and envelopes, the man let his arm fall and seized a sheet of paper.

The next moment Ted found himself approaching and peering over the shoulder of the stranger. He was laboriously writing something—his fingers were stiff as if they were unaccustomed to the work at which they were engaged. He finished and thrust the paper at Radford.

"'Nick Bullen.'" Ted read aloud. "What can I do for you, Mr. Bullen?"

Radford never knew quite what were the incidents of the next few moments. He had a vision of a man, apparently gone quite wild and yet remaining speechless, waving menacing arms and approaching him.

The obvious weakness of the individual who evidently meant to attack him made anything but defense unnecessary. He flung up his hands before him and stood guard.

When he took deliberate cognizance of the situation the man was sprawled at his feet, with blood on his head. Ted saw blood upon his own right hand at the same instant that he observed the strange butler, standing aghast and silent, just inside the door.

CHAPTER II.

SURGERY AND SECRETS.

"You shouldn't be letting in strangers," Ted said sharply to the butler. "Hold the door. We don't want any one bursting in here now."

"Did he attack you, sir?" the butler asked excitedly.

"Keep your nerve. We can't have this get about," Ted cautioned, seeing that the man was unstrung.

"No, sir, of course not. I understand, sir," was the hurried reply.

Ted noticed the air of suppressing something, the intimation of a secret to be kept, with which the man spoke; but he was too much concerned with finding out the condition of the man on the floor to make any observations. He did not guess that the butler believed he had struck the man on the floor.

Ted saw the wound on the man's head. It was high on the white fore-

head, and the long hair and soft felt hat had probably covered it when he entered. But, as he felt the feeble pulse and saw the ghastly face, he realized the impossibility of getting the stranger out of the house at once.

Indeed, so white and faint was the man who had thrust himself upon young Radford at a most inopportune time, that sheer pity and concern for human life made him almost forget the disagreeable sensation that the discovery of his assailant would create among the guests at his mother's wedding.

"Get a glass of wine—quick!" he ordered.

"*Madame* is about to come down, sir. She will be displeased if I am not at the door, and—it will excite comment—and, perhaps, inquiry, sir. She might send one of the servants in here—"

"All right. Go on. I'll look after him," Ted interrupted, seeing the truth of the argument. "Lend a hand first, though. We'll lift him to the couch."

They raised the stranger and carried him to the high-backed davenport.

"Sir, if you are not seen, it will—"

Ted shot a quick and grateful glance at the butler. He was a stranger to him—but it was clear that he was doing what he esteemed his duty in the service of the young gentleman of the house.

It would be decidedly unpleasant to have the mob in the hall pouring into the library and asking a thousand questions about the man with the bloody forehead. Radford pushed the big couch so that the back of it hid the occupant from any one who might happen to glance in either of the doors. Then he wiped the blood from his hand and flung his handkerchief in the waste-basket under the desk.

The butler had returned to the hall whence the sounds of the laughter which greeted Mrs. Barrington's coming came to Radford. He went through the door at the end of the room and made his way into the hall from the dining-room.

Bess, still intent upon his performing his duties more creditably, reentered the library as he left it. She looked about and, not seeing him, made her way across the room to the conservatory. He was not in hiding among the ferns and palms; and she ran back into the library, disgusted with his callousness to appearances and the impression he was surely making on Barrington.

She saw some one on the couch.

"Ted!" she exclaimed, running the length of the room to lean over the foot of the couch.

But she started back in surprise. The queer, high-heeled boots, the baggy gray clothes were such as she had never even seen before. She peered at the gaunt white face with the red stain on the forehead.

Fright took possession of her—fear of the still, ghastly man on the couch. Then another and a worse dread swept her. What had Ted to do with the presence of the blood-stained stranger?

She stood for a moment, breathing hard and clutching at the arms of the couch. Then a ripple of merriment penetrated the still room—and she knew that the guests were gaily bombarding the bride. She pressed her hands to her head as if the fear and surprise she had experienced had confused her. But the old poise which was second nature came back—and she turned and hurried into the hall.

Some one caught her and swung her up on a long carved seat. Across the crowd of guests she caught sight of Ted's white face. Again the wonder came about his connection with the man in the library.

She saw how strained and cold his face was in the midst of such contrasting gaity—and her heart almost stopped beating. Had the man on the couch attacked Ted? And why?

Mrs. Barrington appeared on the broad landing. Bess fought for composure and noticed that Ted elbowed his way through the crowd to await his mother at the foot of the stairs.

"Oh, Teddy—you needn't be look-

ing so glum! You'll do it yourself some day." Mrs. Barrington rallied her son as she shot a meaning glance toward Bess, perched on the seat.

Ted summoned a look of gratification—he must look as if the prospect to which his mother referred was as certain as she suggested. But he found himself wondering how soon he would receive a polite and consoling note for Mrs. Hetherington, regretting the necessity of dissolving the bond between him and Bess.

He fancied it would come in the first post—or by special delivery—immediately on her learning of his financial standing. Just Mr. Barrington could save Bess for him—and the thought of having to rely on him made it hard for Ted to keep the expression suited to the occasion on his face.

He went with his mother down the steps to the car. She managed to whisper to him that while she had anything it was his. He nodded as if he accepted the consolation she meant to offer. The next moment he was gripping hands—almost as if he meant to prove his strength equal to the other's—with Hugo Barrington.

Neither of them said anything. That handshake began and ended their exchange of farewells—but it left a very definite impression on Radford. He received the idea that Barrington was a man with whom one might have to reckon quickly and keenly in order to keep abreast of him.

The departing guests were trooping down the steps. Mrs. Hetherington met him and told him she thought Bess had gone on with some friends. He reentered the house and turned with relief to the matter in hand—getting rid of his unwelcome and unknown guest in the library.

He entered the room. Bess stood just inside and where she could peer over the top of the davenport.

"Ted, who is he?" she asked breathlessly.

Before he could reply the ghastly white face confronted them from over the dark wood of the couch-arm. Bess clutched nervously at Ted.

"You feel equal to—to leaving?" Ted asked, approaching the man.

A sound so unlike a human voice came from the man's lips that Bess turned white.

"I'm sorry to hurry you, Mr. Bullen, but—he can't talk—he's dumb!"

Ted paused and regarded the contortions of the dumb man's face with wonder. He saw the little blood in the cheeks recede. Then Bullen fell back on the couch. But the bleeding wound on his brow had held Bess's fascinated eyes.

"Ted, did you strike him?" she asked.

"Of course not," Radford answered shortly, leaving the room.

Williams, the butler, had finished with his duties at the front door. He came stealing noiselessly into the room.

"Williams, did this man ask for Mr. Radford?" Bess inquired.

"No, Miss Hetherington. He came in with several guests, and I didn't dare stop him. I thought he might be some peculiar family friend. The next I knew Mr. Radford had him on the floor—"

"Mr. Radford struck him?" Bess asked quickly.

"Well, Miss Hetherington, I could not say that exactly. I think the man must have gone at Mr. Radford; and he was obliged to knock him down. When I came in he was standing over him, and his right hand was bloody."

Bess listened to the explanation with accumulating terror. Ted had told her he had not struck the man; but Williams had seen him in the very act of recovering from the blow. Why did he inspire the stranger with a desire to attack him?

The conviction was growing in Bess's mind that this badly dressed, gaunt-looking man had a reason for pushing his way through the company of wedding-guests to attack Frederick Radford.

Radford returned with the wine for

which he had gone. He lifted the man and forced him to drink it.

"Ted, you do know him? Why did he come here?" Bess demanded as Radford handed the empty glass to Williams.

"I never saw him before," Ted answered.

It was the second lie he had told her. He must have seen the uncanny visitor before, else how did he know his name, since Williams had not announced him? Her big, dark eyes fixed on Radford with a look of reproach and resentment.

But Ted was not noticing her. He was absorbed in watching the effect of the wine and hoping for the speedy departure of Bullen.

"All right?" he asked as Bullen seemed to revive. "I'll have a taxi and send you home."

Bess looked at Radford with an expression in her deep eyes which was far from flattering to his judgment. She knew she ought to be leaving herself, but Ted appeared possessed to do the wrong thing; so she defied the conventions she worshiped and stayed.

She descried the crowd of curious people outside the doors of the Fifth Avenue residence, all intent upon seeing what the photographers and newspapermen were doing.

Ted saw that her objection to sending the wounded man away while the spectators still lingered was well taken. It would add a very disagreeable bit of sensationalism to the elaborate report of his mother's marriage to the multimillionaire, which was sure to appear in the papers.

Besides, Ted was growing more and more concerned about Bullen. The man seemed to be growing momentarily weaker, and the thought of having him die there in the house was far from pleasant.

"I'll have to get him to the hospital or—I'll send in for Dr. Milner," Radford said.

"Don't you suppose that the sight of a servant going from here into the doctor's house will stir up the wildest curiosity?" Bess protested.

"Well—what shall I do?" Ted finally demanded.

"Call up a doctor who can come in by some other than the front door. He can look after him, and then, after the people are gone, you can send him to a hospital if he needs to go. You must have struck him hard to make such a gash!"

Radford was at the desk-phone before Bess completed her observation. He was intent upon getting a number, and did not hear the last words.

"Hello! Is Dr. Stratton there?"

Bess straightened up, still and tense, from her inspection of Bullen. An almost imperceptible quiver shook her slender body. But when Ted turned to her, her face wore its look of high-bred, white calm. Only the big eyes burned and glimmered like dark wells disturbed.

"Where's the butler?" Ted asked, discovering that Williams had gone.

He started toward the door, but Bess intercepted him.

"I'll find him. I can't be here—if he dies!" she exclaimed, glancing over her shoulder toward Bullen.

Her looks, the haste with which she left the room, and her words filled Ted with consternation. The ugly situation showed all of its disadvantages in a flash.

Bullen had walked into the library, not a well man, but certainly perfectly able to get about alone. If he died nothing but discomfort and notoriety could be the result.

Ted shuddered at the idea of having his mother's wedding-day made hideous by such an aftermath. He determined to do everything in his power to get Bullen away before the worst could happen. He glanced at the clock and knew that it was time for Stratton to put in an appearance. Then he went to Bullen and stood gazing down on the unconscious face with more anxiety than he had ever experienced in his pleasant life.

Meanwhile, Bess sought Williams.

"Williams," she said, after she had told him to follow her away from the dining-room, where the servants were busy clearing away the tables, "you need not mention to the other servants that this—this—"

"Yes, Miss Hetherington, I understand," the butler replied as she hesitated.

"It would only alarm them to know that a man had come in and attacked Mr. Radford," she continued, her eyes fixed on Williams's face.

"Yes, Miss Hetherington," he answered; but the look that met hers told her that he, too, entertained his own notion of which of the two men in the library had actually done the attacking.

"Mr. Radford wants you," Bess continued.

As Williams hurried toward the library she sat down, dazed and doubting. She forced herself to think clearly of the incidents that had so grimly attended the wedding.

And out of her recalling of them the suspicion that Radford was deeply in the wrong somehow took more complete possession of her.

It was not remarkable that a man with Frederick Radford's picturesque faculty for keeping himself amused, and others entertained by his original methods of doing it, should have gone to lengths which were not always wise or safe.

Bess was hedged about by the kind of people who smile and shrug and forgive or enjoy the escapades of a rich and handsome young man. While she knew nothing of Ted which was really seriously to his discredit, she was too worldly wise to believe that there were not incidents in his life which would not bear inspection.

If he had not told her that he did not know this strange visitor after he had mentioned his name, which the dumb man could not have given him, nor had Williams announced it, Bess might have fought harder against the suspicion of him.

Tutored as she was in the ignorance which her mother believed the proper attitude of nice young girls in regard to the pranks and worse of rich young men, Bess Hetherington had really a keen mind.

It seemed to her that the natural conclusion about Ted's unwelcome guest was that he was some one whose enmity he had incurred and who had taken an opportune moment to retaliate.

Her lip curled at the thought of Radford's resenting what must have been a very weak attack with such a blow as had been dealt the man. But whatever might be her private opinion of Ted's action, she knew but one duty. It was the consideration of appearances.

She was engaged to Ted. The match had been acclaimed as matches between reigning beauties and young Crœsuses are. It was her duty to keep from the public anything to the discredit of her *fiancé*.

Again and again she recalled the fact that Ted had chosen to overlook what she said of the wound in the man's forehead. He had affected to be occupied with the telephone when she spoke of it.

Another motive inspired her to assist Ted in suppressing the affair. She knew positively that Mr. Barrington had rebelled against every detail of the hastily arranged wedding which promised to create talk or unduly interest the newspapers. His aversion to even the attention which so prominent a woman as his wife took for granted, had made many difficulties in the arrangements for the marriage.

Bess was certain that the favor which might be so beneficial to Ted and herself would be certainly alienated if a sensational episode like the entrance of the strange man into the house and his reception by the young man should reach Mr. Barrington's ears.

Bess looked forward to her marriage with Ted for a reason that prompts a good many girls to wed—she wanted the freedom from her

mother's dominance that it insured. And she had been so inured to the contemplation of herself as a commanding social figure that her beauty and charm meant to her a means to that end.

Ted was in love with her. He was indulgent naturally and generous to a fault. Even without the impelling force of a great love, Bess eagerly anticipated marrying him.

Her lovely young face looked even more perfect in its calm as she rose and went toward the library. She had decided to stick by Radford, even though he had told her what she believed other than the truth.

When she entered the room, Radford and Watson were lifting the man from the couch.

"Bess, will you let Midge in? I need Williams, and there's no use of letting the whole house know about this," Ted said to her.

He must have taken her consent for granted, for he continued toward the door, directing all his attention to Bullen, who was unable to assist himself.

Bess watched them go across the hall and enter the elevator. Her breath came fast, and instinctively she pressed her hands against her heart before she recovered herself and stood, silent and wide-eyed, in the room Ted had left. She reproved herself for the emotion that possessed her. Her pride and her ambition fought with it. But the thought that Midge Stratton was coming and that she had been instructed to admit him kept swinging about in her brain till she felt dizzy.

Midge Stratton was coming. She would see him. He would look at her as if his eyes saw but scorned her beauty because his brain disapproved of her and her manner of living.

With his intent professional ambition, his extreme convictions on the uselessness of the lives lived by her and her set, he still held her interest, though they almost never met and their boy and girl friendship had not ripened in their maturity.

In spite of her certainty that she could never join him in his devotion to work, in his aversion to society, she felt toward him as she had never felt toward Ted.

She knew the way to the north basement door, and she followed it as if she crept toward a forbidden goal. It would be like him to appropriate any motor-car that happened to be handy if his own were not there, and come rushing at the call of friendship. She thought admiringly of his quality of fidelity and likened her decision to stand by Ted to it.

In the half-gloom of the stairway she stood waiting. Suddenly her brain taunted her with the assumption she had made—that Stratton's self-forgetting enthusiasm in the service of his friend was like hers. She was loyal to Ted for ambition's sake, for money. Midge Stratton was above anything mercenary or selfish.

Against the ground glass in the door she saw the outline of the big shoulders that had won him his humorously inappropriate nickname. He shook the door slightly before she could gather courage to go to it. When she had withdrawn the bolt and turned the key she fled back up the stairs before he saw who had admitted him into the dark hall.

A vague, slender shape in the twilight of the stairway, he stopped and peered up at her.

"It's Bess," she whispered.

"What's the matter with Ted?" he asked, covering the steps between them and showing by his voice that he assumed something serious by her presence and the fact that he had been sent for so hurriedly.

"Nothing," Bess replied, summoning her serenity, even while she observed with some bitterness that he was concerned so completely for his friend that the meeting with her had no power to divert him.

"Who's sick?" he asked.

"It's a man—some crank or lunatic who rushed in and attacked Ted so

that he had to strike him," Bess explained, as she thought best.

Stratton whistled softly.

"Where is he?"

Bess made no reply, but led Stratton rapidly toward the elevator.

"I'll take you up. I don't know where Ted has put him. It was best not to let the servants know."

Stratton followed her into the elevator, and she pressed the button for the third floor. Then she turned to the doctor.

"Midge, you'd stand by Ted through — anything, wouldn't you?" she asked, her white face lifted to his.

"Through thick and thin," he answered quietly..

"If the man should die it might be —unpleasant!" she whispered.

"We won't let him die!" Stratton said fervently.

"Oh, Midge!"

It was a girl's adoring approbation of the strength and faithfulness of the man she loves that sounded in Bess's voice. Her rare face, its wonderful eyes burning with a beauty they had never shown to any other being, was close to his. He kissed her.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS NICK BULLEN.

RADFORD, impatiently waiting, tore open the sliding door as the lift reached the third floor and the spring released the lock. He looked like an avenging fate to the two in the car.

But their looks did not impress him. He was worried over the condition of Bullen, whom he had succeeded, with Williams's help, in getting on a bed in the butler's room.

"Come along, Midge. Do something for this poor devil!" he urged.

Stratton needed no inspiration to haste. Already he was consumed with his own scorn and with remorse. He had yielded to an impulse which it was disgraceful for him even to feel, since he knew perfectly that Ted and his money had won the girl to whom both of them had offered boys' shy admiration before their ways in life dvided.

He and Radford had maintained their friendship, though not the old intimacy which had made the north basement door an easy route to each other. He had accepted Ted's success with Bess as natural when a girl's mother had saturated her with love of money and social power. He had religiously avoided meeting her until accident had thrown them together under Ted's own roof, there to make him disgrace himself in his own eyes.

Bess had shut the elevator door literally in Radford's face. He had turned impetuously to rush down the stairs and join her before she could leave the house; but second thought had been better counsel. It behooved him to give all possible aid to Midge in promoting the recovery of Bullen, so he hurried to the room where Stratton was examining his patient.

"Williams, go down and assist Miss Hetherington!" he ordered, then he turned to Stratton.

The young doctor was absorbed in Bullen. His face was disconcertingly grave. Ted watched him anxiously.

"He's pretty bad, Midge?" he questioned

"I'm sorry, Ted, but it looks dubious," Stratton acknowledged.

He looked suddenly from Bullen to Radford. An expression of surprise, with a tinge of disapproval, came on his face.

"Jove, Ted, you needn't have landed him one like this—even if he did attack you!" he exclaimed.

"I didn't hit him!" Ted protested.

"Somebody did. And they hit hard!" Stratton muttered, more intent upon the examination, which was more and more alarming, than upon the fact which Ted denied and Bess had asserted. "Lend a hand here!"

Ted sprang to obey, thinking of nothing but assisting Stratton in his efforts to keep Bullen alive.

Stratton had discovered a leather

belt drawn too tightly about the lean figure of his patient. He lifted him up and directed Ted to loosen the buckle, which had slipped around to the back. Radford managed to pull the prongs from the eyelets and the belt from under Bullen. He flung it on the foot of the bed.

"He's just gotten over a fever. He needs the right kind of nursing and food. Call up Miss Thorpe, 2122 Murray Hill—"

Radford took his eyes from Bullen's appallingly white face. He had heard Stratton's words with a sudden realization that he was placed most painfully. The house was really no longer his to dispense its hospitality; he must make some other arrangement.

"Midge, he'd better go to a hospital, It's — it's not exactly convenient to keep him here," he suggested.

Stratton gave him one of his searchingly direct looks. Radford was obviously embarrassed.

"No one need know how he came here. You can say he's a friend of yours—" he began, thinking that Ted objected to the man's presence in the house on account of the comment it might create.

"He's not a friend of mine," Radford exclaimed. "But that's not the reason. It—it would be decidedly embarrassing for me to have him here."

"I won't take the responsibility of having him moved just now," Stratton replied, grimly wondering what it was that influenced Ted Radford to behave like an unfeeling brute.

The man's condition was so precarious. His appearance must have told Radford that such was the case. Yet he refused to harbor him after he had had something to do with reducing the patient to helplessness.

"If you're afraid of his dying on your hands—" he began, unable to keep his disapproval quite out of his voice.

"It isn't that, Midge; but I—"

"Well, he can't be moved!" Stratton said conclusively. "If you don't phone to Miss Thorpe I'll do it myself."

Emotions in us all are subtle things. It gave Stratton a sense of relief to find that the man he had injured was radically at fault himself. He began to suspect that the presence of Bullen in the Fifth Avenue house meant a good deal more than showed superficially and was seriously to the discredit of Radford.

Almost the instant the thoughts took shape he disowned them as the disordered and somewhat cowardly reflex of his own remorse about the caress he had given and taken from Radford's *fiancée*. But he could not argue himself out of the feeling that Radford was far from gracious in his treatment of the man he had harmed.

It seemed small and unlike Ted that he should display a disposition to carry the punishment, which the man's intrusion might have necessitated, to a point of absolute cruelty.

Stratton left the bedside and went to the telephone in the hall. He called up the number of the nurse with whom he trusted his most important cases. A pleasantly childish voice answered.

"Hello, Natalie! Is Miss Thorpe there? I need her at once."

At that moment Bullen rose from the pillow with the erratic strength of a delirious man and began the horrible mumbling that was his poor substitute for speech. Stratton called Radford to take the phone while he went to the patient.

The doctor's big hands with their skilled touch soothed Bullen so that Radford could hear, undistracted, the voice that was asking a half dozen questions in the effort to establish the connection which seemed broken.

"Hello! No, this isn't Dr. Stratton, little girl," Radford replied, amused by the child's excitement and the quaintly musical French accent that did alluring little turns with the unique English she spoke.

Instantly offended dignity sounded over the wire as plainly as it could have

been observed if the little girl had been in sight.

"I am not a leetle girl! An' eet ees who speaks?" she retorted.

The voice, a vocalized expression of light and air, stirred Ted. Possibly because it was about the only agreeable thing he had encountered since his home-coming.

"This is Frederick Radford. Dr. Stratton was talking to you when the patient who needs the nurse demanded his attention. Will you ask the nurse to come at once — to 5 — Fifth Avenue?" Ted explained.

"Pleas say to Doctaire Stratton Mees Thorpe ees not here; but I weel phone where she ees an' tell her to go at once to heem. Ask heem to tell her I bring her theengs to her thair."

The little girl evidently considered the interview over; she hung up the receiver. Radford delivered the message with a ghost of a smile accompanying it. If Midge had been less concerned with his patient, and he a trifle less burdened with the thought of his own unsatisfactory situation, he might have observed that the little lady of the pleasant voice must be a 'cute kid.' As it was, and after the manner of young men with little girls, he forgot her.

Feeling that his desertion while Bullen's fate was in the balance necessitated apology, he stood at the foot of the bed and picked up the leather belt casually.

"If you don't need me, Midge, I've got some business that must be looked after," he said, feeling the soft leather with the approving fingers of a connoisseur.

He wanted to get to a telephone where there was no danger of his being heard and interview Marsh, the family lawyer. His mother's statement of his complete ruin might be a woman's exaggerated expression of a condition that was not hopeless. He felt that he must know certainly.

Stratton objected quietly to his going. He might be needed. If he had to call on some one else the undesirable presence of Mr. Bullen would become more a matter of curiosity than was agreeable.

Ted silently accepted the situation; but Stratton could see that he grew more and more uneasy as the time passed and Miss Thorpe did not appear.

Finally he started up from the chair where he had thrown himself and fallen into a reverie and an uncommunicativeness that was sufficiently unlike him to stimulate Stratton's wonder more than ever.

"Midge! I've got to go! I can't wait any longer. It's—it's a matter of vital importance to me. I'm—it looks as if I were all in financially. I've got to do something."

Stratton looked up quickly. He and Radford lived very different lives; but he immediately jumped at the conclusion that Ted had been gambling or otherwise involved himself to an extent which made him anxious. He instantly offered his small resources to his friend.

"You couldn't help me out now, old chap! Thank you just the same," Ted exclaimed gratefully.

Midge received the impression that Ted's need went beyond the power of his limited finances to supply. It explained somewhat the unwonted absorption which had perplexed him.

"Miss Thorpe ought to be along any time now. I won't detain you if it's so important—"

"Important!" Ted burst out. "It's everything!"

There was no room for doubt of the desperate position in which Radford stood. His manner and his words convinced Stratton of that.

"Say, Ted, I'd like to know a little more about this chap before you go," he said, as Radford turned toward the door.

"You know as much as I—almost. He came into the library. It was just when mother was leaving; and I guess I got a bit excited for fear something

might happen to make it unpleasant for her. He began that hideous performance of his, and, by George, the next I knew he was stretched out on the floor and I was standing there with my right hand red with his blood."

"You struck him, then," Midge said, thinking he heard the corroboration of Bess's information. "He attacked you and you hit him. He's one of those cranks that—"

Stratton was putting the most favorable interpretation on the affair. But Ted immediately spoiled it.

"Struck him? I tell you I didn't. What in thunder would I be hitting a man like that for? I could have blown at him and upset him!" Ted protested indignantly.

"He didn't just fall down with a big red cut on his head, Ted. That's not probable. It's not sane for you to—"

Radford scowled at Stratton.

"That's the way it was," he replied, resenting the doubt that the doctor showed.

"Who is he?" Stratton asked.

"His name's Bullen. Nick Bullen. That's all I know about him. Something's the matter; he don't seem to be able to talk."

Radford had turned to look at Bullen and again his attention was attracted to the snakeskin belt. He picked it up. It occurred to him that the belt might be a receptacle for papers or something that would identify the invalid.

The beautifully cured and perfectly soft leather was folded several times. Ted ran his finger along the lap and felt the snap-fasteners. He pulled at them. The belt spread out and a rain of greenbacks fell on the bed.

"Look!" he exclaimed.

Midge was looking, his eyes intent and amazed as he read the figures on the bills. They were of five-hundred-dollar denomination. The snakeskin belt was literally padded with them.

Stratton and Radford stared at each other across the shower of money. Then they looked at Bullen, silent and apparently unconscious. They began to pick up the money that had fallen, and Ted counted the bills still in the belt. In all, there was ten thousand dollars.

"He didn't come to steal!" Ted exclaimed.

"I guess *not!*" Stratton agreed.

But the surprise of finding Bullen the possessor of such wealth could not keep Radford's mind from returning to the problem of his own future. Indeed, the sight of the money seemed to reenergize his worries. They started up again to painful activity. He must get in communication with Marsh at once and know exactly how nearly ruined he was.

"I've got to be off, Midge. I'll put this in the top drawer of this chiffonier. You can give the key to Bullen when he asks about it."

Radford left at once. Stratton had his hands full with Bullen while wonder and doubt shared his thoughts. Ted sought his own room and called up Marsh. Five minutes' conversation convinced him that his mother's representation of his affairs was right. He was completely ruined.

The shock of the absolute knowledge was scarcely less than the original one had been. He knew that he had been clinging to a straw only to find even that snatched from him. Groaning with the torture of his position, Radford flung himself into a chair and gave up to grim despair.

Bess, a lovely, unreachable woman, luring him more now than she had ever done in the days when he calmly anticipated possession, moved through every miserable thought that came to him like a gorgeous and withheld goddess. He tried to face the need of telling her what had happened, of breaking the engagement.

If he had seen her as she hurried out of the house that had been his he would have rebelled more than ever against the fate which had taken her from him. Her head was higher than usual.

Her beauty was transcendant. It had acquired that final, illuminating touch which love gives to the coldly beautiful type of woman.

Midge Stratton had waked the depths of her; but hers was the kind of loveliness which bred in men the desire for conquest. Radford naturally loved dominance. He liked to have the things that represented perfection in various lines.

The agony he was enduring at the thought of losing her was as much a torture of his pride as of his love. If it had been his misfortune to see her in that marvelous hour of her full-blooming, he would have felt the catastrophe that had overtaken him with a pain and rebellion beyond what he was experiencing.

Bess leaned back in the dark-blue luxury of her car and glorified like the pagan that she was at heart, in the wrong thing she had done. She shivered with the ecstasy of it. She seized the violets from the cut-glass holder and buried her trembling lips in them.

"I'm glad—glad—glad—I did it! This once! I've a right to one taste of happiness!" she whispered.

The one taste of happiness she allowed herself showed that she had no intention of giving up the position and wealth that Radford would supply for more of the divine food on which her heart was feeding.

It never occurred to her that her marriage to Ted was to be affected by the fact that she loved with all the soul she possessed poor and work-mad Midge Stratton. Neither had she the remotest intention of allowing herself to encourage the emotions that possessed her when she should have given herself to Radford.

In the gloriously satisfying sense of completeness she felt, she did not dream that hunger for other tastes of joy might come to her. She knew the strength of her ambition and trusted to it. She did not guess the power of her real nature and the struggle it would make against its own sacrifice.

Williams had left the room where Bullen was established with such haste that it seemed he must have moved according to a definite intention. He made speed that scorned the elevator to the library.

His eyes swept the room with glances that saw everything. Ted's handkerchief, red with the blood he had wiped from his right hand, hung over the side of the waste-basket where he had tossed it. Williams went toward it with the cautious certainty of a cat sure of its mouse-prey. He folded it carefully and thrust it into the tail-pocket of his coat.

A loose envelope, apparently fallen from among its fellows in the rack, caught his order-loving eye. He stopped and replaced it.

As he went into the hall he saw his assistant engaged with a big man in dark-blue clothes. They were evidently arguing.

Five minutes later Williams shut the door behind the burly caller and went to Radford's room. As Ted called to him to come he almost started at the change in the handsome face of the young gentleman of the house.

"You're not ill, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no—I'm all right!" Ted answered shortly.

Williams accepted the situation in the way Radford evidently wished him to; but he continued to think that he had never observed a quicker change from the unworried aspect of well-being to the pale, lined expression of mental and physical suffering than had taken place in the young man whom he had seen enter the house scarcely two hours before.

He explained that he had come up to report the visit of a detective who had been stationed to watch the house during the wedding. Ted listened to the information that a strange-appearing man had been seen by some of the policemen about, and that he had disappeared apparently into the Fifth Avenue house.

"What did you tell him?" Ted asked sharply, vexed at being worried by the affair of Bullen when he had such serious concerns that needed his attention.

"I told him, sir, that the man was a friend of the family. I just gave him to understand that he had made a big effort to get here to the wedding, and he was going to stay a while till he felt stronger," Williams replied. "Was I right, sir?"

"Very good," Ted commended, feeling that the butler had displayed a good deal of tact. "If any of the servants ask questions you might say the same thing to them."

"It seems, sir, that Mr. Barrington has been bothered by cranks. The detective was afraid one had gotten by —and that he wouldn't get the money that was coming to him for the job if he seemed to have been careless, sir," Williams added.

Radford appreciated what Williams said in spirit, even if the letter was less suggestive. He implied that the detective was being nicely rewarded for looking after Mr. Barrington's interest, and that it would be in order for Ted himself to be as generous to one who was safeguarding his. He pulled his bill-book from his pocket and responded with a curious feeling that the time was short in which he could be generous.

Ten minutes after Williams left him he pulled himself together and rang for his own machine. The decent thing for him to do was to go at once to Bess and her mother and explain his change of fortune.

"May I come in?"

Ted almost jumped. It was the something agreeable happening so unexpectedly in the chaos of worry and disaster.

"Indeed you may!" he exclaimed cordially, crossing the sitting-room with quick steps and flinging open the door to the gay little girl who had the sweet voice.

But it was still more of the unexpected when he saw the little creature who stood there. She carried a suit-case that was almost as big as herself, and she was dressed in the most depressingly black garb that Ted had ever seen. She was not at all the bright child he had expected to see.

"*Ma tante?* She ees here?" she asked, fixing on Radford two eyes that seemed to make up the most of her face.

"Well—I guess not. I haven't seen any *ma tantes* around here," he replied, purposely exerting the charm that ordinarily acted spontaneously.

There was something appealing in the black little figure and the great, glowing eyes; he was afraid she might be frightened when she discovered that the person she sought was not there.

"You are twice meestaken, *monsieur,*" was the surprising answer his pleasant condescension won. "Three times even! For you count me a child twice, an' I know Mees Thorpe ees here—so!"

Radford understood. This was the niece of Miss Thorpe, the nurse that Stratton had summoned.

"You're mistaken once, so that evens up some," he replied, stirred to interest by the independence of the girl. "Miss Thorpe must be in the room above this."

She shifted the suit-case from one hand to the other and turned away.

"Pardon, *monsieur.* I thought I climb high enough," she murmured.

"You have," he said decidedly, realizing that whoever had let her in had considered her not entitled to the elevator. "Come on."

He took the suit-case from her and felt her small hand, hot through the cotton glove. As they waited for the elevator to come she shot hungry glances at the luxury about her.

Radford saw and pitied the paleness; noticed the delicately beautiful profile she turned to him.

"What is your name, little girl?" he asked.

"Mlle. le Fevre," she returned, with a scorching glance that should have consumed him.

But it did not. To him she looked like a fragile, temperamental child, intent upon playing young lady. For the instant he forgot his troubles and smiled broadly at her quaint and haughty demeanor.

"Mlle. le Fevre, will you step inside?" he requested punctiliously.

The girl lifted her eyes, and, even while she bit her lip in vexation, she read the genuine kindness that was so large a part of Radford's nature.

"Truly, *monsieur,* I am not a leetle girl," she assured him. "I am twenty years old."

It is not always the sympathy we expect that touches us so deeply that our feelings swing like resounding bells in a wonderful harmony of tenderness. It is often the chance manifestation of a gentle spirit that reaches the dead chambers of the stricken heart.

So Natalie le Fevre's voice, low and sweet, with its faint tinge of accent quaintly coloring it, swept into Ted's ears, forgivingly reproachful, so patiently kind.

Ted forgot that his mother had escaped from the falling fortunes of their house, leaving him alone. He forgot that he was about to do that which would rob him of his *fiancée.* He just remembered that here was a little creature whose consideration and gentleness had traveled surely to his mind and heart and cheered him.

"*Adieu,* Mlle. le Fevre!" he said very softly as she stepped from the car.

"*Adieu, monsieur!*" she replied, with a gleaming look from her big eyes that swam brilliantly in Ted's as he sent the car down.

When he reached the first floor he saw Williams going toward the front door.

"My car here, Williams?"

"I'll see, sir. I was just answering the bell."

Ted paused in the obscurity of the hall. Williams opened the door. Mr. Hugo Barrington, the bridegroom of barely three hours, entered the house.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CALL OF ARIZONA.

RADFORD stood for a long moment, dazed by the unexpected appearance of the bridegroom. Then he hurried toward him.

"Anything wrong with mother?" he asked anxiously, thinking of that as the only reason for the return of Mr. Barrington.

"Nothing. I came back on an errand for her," Barrington said quietly.

"Where is she?" Ted inquired.

"At the Ritz in my apartment. We had planned to stop there for lunch before we motored out to Cressymere. She remembered something she had forgotten, so I turned errand-boy."

Radford regarded his new stepfather with frank curiosity. He could not imagine that his mother had forgotten anything so vital to her need or pleasure that she must have it before it might be sent to the country to her.

He wondered if this particularly steel-and-stone combination of a man had not discovered his own and sole weak-and-soft spot since he came into the circle of his mother's influence. The idea amused him enough to bring the light into his blue eyes.

"You might have phoned. I could have brought it down," Ted observed.

"I—well, to be quite honest, neither of us thought of that," Barrington confessed with a shamefaced frankness that proved to Ted that he had been right in his conclusion.

There was something comforting in the embarrassment of Mr. Barrington. It made him seem less a creature of solemn importance, the arbiter of his fate in a way, and more human, for he was obviously bored at the realization and the observation by another

that he was behaving in the accepted manner of the newly married man.

"Mother told you where to find what she wants?" Ted asked, refraining from expressing any curiosity since Barrington had not been explanatory.

"Directions like the chart for an ocean voyage," Barrington said briefly, turning toward the library, as if eager to accomplish his errand.

"If I can't be of service I'll go on," Ted said, pausing an instant longer, then going toward the door as Barrington proceeded to the library.

There was nothing now to keep him from his visit to Mrs. Hetherington and her daughter; but Ted went as if he were being dragged by some invisible force against which he rebelled.

It would have been easier if his mother had hinted to the Hetheringtons something of what had happened; but very evidently she had not, else Bess would never have remained in the house after her mother left when the wedding was over.

It was like setting about to amputate one of his own limbs. Ted would have been grateful to any one who would take the actual operation off his hands. But his sense of what was due Bess drove him on.

Barrington paused inside the library door and rang the bell for Williams.

"Any mail or inquiries for me, Williams?"

The butler looked a bit surprised at the question. But he carefully eliminated all expression from his countenance when he saw that a bill of unusual denomination was being pulled from the multimillionaire's pocketbook. He became more intently interested, naturally.

"I thought some one might have called on me here," Barrington said as he laid the bill in Williams's hand.

"No one, sir," the butler answered, trying to formulate a reason why Barrington should have expected to be looked up at the home of Mrs. Barrington.

"You have not seen a man—he is a detective and—I believe his name is Sullivan?" Barrington asked as he went toward the desk.

"Oh, yes, sir! He was here and—" Williams had Barrington's bill safely in his pocket, but he knew that he was to be retained at the town house and was to take his orders from young Radford.

He paused and decided not to mention the inquiry that the detective had made about the strange man who had entered the house and was still under the roof. It was Mr. Radford's affair, and it was his duty and the safe thing for him to do to keep the matter quiet.

"Well?" Barrington prompted, watching him with his keen eyes.

"He just wished to make a report to some one, I think. I didn't disturb Mr. Radford, but just told him that the detective said he had seen no one."

Williams was glib and had the advantage of an amazingly innocent face. Barrington told him he could go, and went to the desk. He opened a drawer on the right, as if he had had definite instructions about the location of something in it. He pushed aside the paper and peered in the corners, as if the object of his search were small. But he was unsuccessful.

He reached across the polished top to open another, but his sleeve brushed the envelope-rack and knocked several of them to the desk. Instinctively methodical as he was, he paused in his search to replace them.

The next moment the self-confident financier sank back in the desk-chair with starting eyes and lips parted, as if breath came hard. Once he shook himself slightly, as if he tried to dislodge something heavy that clung to him.

Gradually his fighting will overcame the sick fear that had mastered him, and he sat up and took one of the envelopes in his hand. It was that one on which Nick Bullen had painfully written his name.

He pushed himself up from his chair; then he settled back again. He had thought of summoning Williams to explain the writing on the envelope, but realized that his inquiry, after the questions he had already asked, would illicit nothing and might arouse curiosity.

He compared the envelope on which the scraggly, uncertain letters appeared to the others in the rack. It bore the same water-mark, and he was sure that it had been taken from among them. He fastened his eyes and the mind that had mastered the big problems with which life had confronted him on the writing.

A child might have done it. He could reach no conclusion; but that name, threatening all he had become, threatening the happiness into which he had pushed his way with clenched teeth, stared at him from the thick, white paper. It was there. He could not get away from that. It was there, and he had no idea nor was able to form a guess at how it had come there.

It was an unfamiliar script, but its menace was potent and throbbed about him with the silent chaos of approaching destruction. It was to Hugo Barrington a warning that roused every energy of his powerful nature and stirred new feelings which he had never before experienced.

For he loved Lucile with a concentrated fervor that was like the flowering of all the force, natural and cultivated, of his being. Hitherto he had lived for power in the world of men. Now the world of men meant nothing. His world was one woman. Of all the soundless threats which the name on the envelope expressed, none equaled the possibility of losing her.

With a settling of his features to a rigidity suggesting capacities for holding what he had gained that promised a titanic struggle with whatever tried to overthrow him, he seized the envelope and crushed it in his powerful grip.

The gesture was terrifying in its significance. The smothering of a human being, the crushing of a combination of forces were expressed by it. And with it Hugo Barrington rose to his full stature physically and as a man of almost invincible fighting strength and faculty.

He pulled a handsome gold cigarette-case from his pocket and extracted a cigarette. He found a match and leisurely lighted it.

Casually, as if neither the waiting bride nor the threatening envelope concerned him, he strolled toward the fireplace where masses of flowers filled the brick opening. Then he returned to the desk, seated himself, and puffed contentedly. His unoccupied fingers reached for the envelope which he had tossed back on the polished top, and, as if he were half unconscious of what he did, he tore the paper to shreds.

Still, with the same deliberation he went again to the fireplace, laid the little heap of paper on the hearth, and lighted it from his cigarette. With his eyes on the door, he stood with his foot ready to stamp out the tiny blaze should any one come.

In a moment the envelope was ashes. With a long-stemmed rose that he drew from among the flowers in the grate he flicked the charred paper and the light ashes back into the fireplace.

He even looked at the rose idly before he pushed it back in place. There was a completeness about the whole deliberate performance which was a commentary on the way in which Mr. Hugo Barrington could attend to anything which held his interest.

It was impossible to find in him one sign of weakness, one slightest indication of the relaxation and white terror that had made his strong figure and face seem like the externals of another than himself.

He returned to the desk and resumed the search which had been so suddenly interrupted. At last he found

what he sought under the curved base of the big bronze inkstand.

It was a very small key, for a jewel-case perhaps, or any one of the receptacles in which women put things carefully away—to lose them. He was so completely himself by now that he smiled at the explicitly wrong directions he had received. They were a manifestation of the wonderful femininity of Lucile, the faintly perfumed, frilly edged, warmly soft femininity that was whirling him into new and delightful fields of experience.

With the key in his hand he went up-stairs and entered his wife's suite. Traces of the wedding and her excited departure still lingered. White flowers withered on a satin chair. A length of something blue and filmy trailed over the head of a chaise longue.

A delicate fragrance hung in the air, as if it missed and waited for the woman the breath of whose body it was.

Barrington paused just inside the door, a strange, hesitating reverence holding him. He lifted his head and inhaled the perfume. Something refining, softening, uplifting had come into his life with Lucile; and he stopped there, sensing it with a worshipful gratitude.

They had been sitting over the luncheon-table, prolonging with the wisdom of maturity moments that held charm and promise. Lucile suddenly caught her under lip with her white, even teeth, and, with blue eyes waiting for him to read the pretty pantomime and ask its meaning, looked at him.

"I forgot those papers you asked me to bring," she had replied to his question.

Lucile read that he was disappointed. She rose and went to him, drawing the palm of her soft hand across his lips and leaning lightly against him.

"It would take you less than half an hour to go back for them," she suggested—not because she cared for the business documents, but because she knew he cared. "I won't run away and leave you—yet."

Barrington paused long enough—it was as if his new imaginative and emotional energy exerted its young strength against the old and tried business nature—to kiss her hand and press the soft hand against his face. Then he rose and set off on the errand, while she followed him with the minute directions which had proved incorrect.

Now he crossed the boudoir and entered the bedroom. He secured the box which contained the papers. He looked them over with quick eyes and fingers.

The healthy color of his skin altered perceptibly. He looked gray and drawn. Twice within the hour he had had shocks that went to the depths of him.

He ran over the papers again. But he was certain that what he sought was not among them.

When the telephone-bell rang he started as if he had been roused from thoughts that made every sound a threat. Then he knew that it must be Lucile. He went into the boudoir and heard her voice reproaching him for his long absence.

"Lucile, are you sure that all of your papers are here?" he asked, forcing himself to speak naturally.

She took it for an expression of disappointment in her financial status.

"Hugo, I told you that I had nothing of any value," she protested. "Those papers are all that Mr. Marsh turned over to me."

"He may have—"

"He has nothing of mine, Hugo. What he has that may belong to Ted I do not know. Only I know this—whatever it is, it is valueless," she replied positively.

Barrington's lips closed for an instant in a straight, hard line. But when he spoke to her it was with the kindly intonation which she welcomed

back in his voice with characteristic spontaneity.

"You mustn't be too sure that your son is a pauper. What he has may be of some value yet," he said.

"I wish it might prove so. But I'm certain it is useless to hope. His father probably anticipated that some of the stock he left him would increase in value, but—it hasn't," Lucile answered.

Hugo Barrington picked up the worthless papers. It was like him to take them to his wife, even though he had lost interest in them. His mind now was centered on acquiring what he believed to be in Frederick Radford's possession.

Meanwhile, Radford had his journey for nothing. Neither Bess nor her mother was at home, and when the butler asked if he wished to leave word when he would call again Ted said he would not with a sense of relief that, though he knew the respite was merely postponing his hour of torture, was still very real.

Impetuous chronically, Frederick Radford became possessed of a kind of desperate energy when he turned away from the front door of the Hetherington house. He rushed around to his club and telephoned a dealer that his blue-ribbon polo ponies were for sale. Almost before he realized it, the dealer had told him that he was looking for just such a find and Ted had agreed to the bargain.

A determination, the wisdom of which he did not stop to question, had sprung full-grown in him. The aversion he felt for becoming a dependent on the man his mother had married was its inspiration. He decided to sell his personal effects, settle his private debts, and get away from New York and all that it meant to him.

His naturally straightforward nature rebelled against what he was doing in regard to Bess. He should have been able to brace himself and submit personally to the ordeal of breaking the engagement; but he was not.

Neither did he propose to hang around town, and have to suffer the curiosity and the sympathy of his friends. It would be too much to expect that Mrs. Hetherington could be entirely circumspect about the reason for the broken engagement.

The fact that his mother was the wife of a man of such enormous wealth would make it necessary for Bess's mother to explain that Radford himself had nothing.

Silence would lessen the value of her daughter in the matrimonial market. The reason for the interruption to the plans which had been so generally advertised must be forthcoming.

Ted recalled his mother's hasty intimation that he should be provided for; but the very thought that the explanation which Mrs. Hetheringon would circulate would announce him, if he stayed in the East and continued to live in his old style, a dependent on Barrington gave the final prod to his decision. He would leave the next day if he could possibly get his affairs in shape.

Already he was outgrowing his old, pleasure-loving self. He knew it by the disgust with which he acknowledged to himself that the affairs he had to arrange were debts for luxuries in clothes, at the club, at the jewelers' —all the obligations of an idle, self-centered man.

When he reached home he asked for Barrington, knowing that he had probably gone long before. Yet it was a distinct relief to him to know that the millionaire was positively not under the roof which was formerly his own and was now actually the property of the man who had saved his mother from ruin.

Moved by kindly interest as well as curiosity, he went up to Bullen's room. The new nurse met him. Beyond her, he caught sight of the little girl, and was glad he had come.

Before he could do more than bow, Bullen's gray eyes opened and fastened on him with a look of such imperative eagerness that he went instinctively

toward the bed. The man made a weak gesture which indicated that he wanted writing materials. Ted took his address-book from his pocket and adjusted his fountain pen.

"P-i-ñ-o-n," Radford spelled aloud as the man wrote laboriously.

As if the word were an electric signal, little Mlle. le Fevre sprang toward the bed like a small spirit of light and energy. She almost snatched the paper from Ted's hand as he was studying it.

"I think that's the name of a nut," he said doubtfully.

Bullen's face twisted horribly. Ted's solution was not right. But little Mlle. le Fevre bent above him, fairly palpitating with excitement.

"*Non! Non!* Eet ees the name of a citee—ees eet not?"

Bullen turned grateful eyes on her, and fastened them there as if his hope of being understood was centered in the little lady.

"Eet ees a citee of Arizona," Mlle. le Fevre explained.

"Oh, I see! You live at Piñon, Arizona, Mr. Bullen."

But Radford appeared to have shaken the serenity that the little lady had established temporarily. Again the hideous contortions with which Bullen accompanied his abortive efforts at speech turned his face from its human semblance to a mask that was so alarming it frightened Mlle. le Fevre and made Radford step back to let the nurse get close to her patient.

"Go! Go at once! You excite him! Dr. Stratton says he must be kept quiet!" Miss Thorpe ordered with the decision of one accustomed to unquestioned obedience.

Ted and Mlle. le Fevre fled from the room with the fear that they had done vital harm to the patient.

"Oh, he looked as eef he could keel you!" the little girl whispered when they were in the hall with the door closed between them and Bullen. "He must hate you!"

Radford felt a sudden, unaccountable but very intense desire to defend himself. He somehow wanted the little girl to think well of him.

"He couldn't hate me when he has never seen me before to-day, could he? You wouldn't hate me—at first sight, would you?" he asked.

Quite without intending it, he spoke as if she were a child. She seemed that—a pale, emotional child, who could flush and glow and be tender almost like a woman.

"*Monsieur,*" she said slowly, her even little teeth seeming almost to bite off the words, "eet ees quite possible that I hate you—at first sight—eef you treat me as a child. Because you are *beeg*"—the way she said it insidiously took the conceit out of each separate inch of Radford's six feet—"an' I am leetle ees not a reason that you should fail to treat me as a lady!"

Before Radford could reply, she had flitted like a large black moth back into the very room from which she had been ejected. He dared not follow.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEAD MAN IN THE POOL.

"NATALIE!"

It was the stern reproach of the nurse whose patient's well-being is her one thought. Bullen lay against the pillow so white and still that Natalie's big eyes grew bigger with fright.

"Ah, *ma tante,* he knows of Piñon, Arizona! I could not but return!" she apologized.

"Well, Mlle. le Fevre, I—"

Miss Thorpe had begun with a dignity which Natalie knew was the introduction to a good scolding; but she never reached it. Bullen's gray eyes flew open, and the expression that illuminated them showed that he knew perfectly what was passing around him. He wriggled a weak finger in a gesture which the eager Natalie took for a command to approach. She obeyed instantly.

She seized the pen and book that

Miss Thorpe had picked up and laid on the table beside the bed. Bullen took it with a look that said he approved of the little lady's quick understanding of his wishes.

"Is your name Le Fevre?" he wrote slowly.

Natalie nodded and watched him continue his writing.

"Frenchy Fill-up!" she read aloud, her young voice throbbing either with excitement or anger.

Bullen gesticulated weirdly with his pen from the name to her.

"You mean, perhaps, my uncle—Phillipe le Fevre?" she exclaimed.

Bullen grinned uncertainly. But if he imagined that the little girl would appreciate his showing some acquaintance with her family, he was mistaken. A more indignant, bright-eyed, flame-cheeked young woman never fixed haughty attention on any one.

"You are one of those men who persecuted my Oncle Phillipe!" she accused.

Sounds so hideous that they startled the haughtiness quite away and turned the little lady to a terrified child, running to Miss Thorpe for safety, came from Bullen's speechless mouth. He was laughing.

The Westerner's sense of humor was intact, though illness and his peculiar affliction turned its expression into something at once grotesque and pitiful. Natalie gradually interpreted the noises.

"Yes, I know!" she flamed, coming into her bravery and anger again. "You drive my Oncle Phillipe from hees home—hees fine home! He tole me how you are vandals and peegs! Peegs, he say! Some day when I am reech I go out there to Piñon, Arizona, and punish all cowboy and other beast'!"

Miss Thorpe tried vainly to stop the laughter that greeted this indignant tirade. Bullen shook with it.

"You call heem Frenchy Fill-up! I know about that! I shall some day make each cowboy apologize—to me, the niece of Phillipe le Fevre!" Natalie cried.

Bullen wrote again. Natalie almost snatched the book from him.

"Ain't you rich now? This is some house," was Bullen's remark.

"Eet ees not my home! Eet ees hees!"

Natalie had brought the paper in which the report of the wedding and the pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Barrington, as well as Radford's, were all presented. She pointed her small finger at Radford. It amazed her when the invalid with unexpected strength pulled the sheet out of her hands.

Her inquiries about Piñon, Arizona, elicited nothing further from the Westerner. He was intent upon the perusal of the account of the wedding which had taken place in the house where he was lying.

Miss Thorpe saw with considerable satisfaction that he had evidently determined to be still and rest himself. She saw him studying the pictures of the wonderful house and grounds at Cressymere, where the distinguished honeymooners had gone, with a concentration which proved him wholly absorbed.

Natalie finally left, discouraged at not learning more of her uncle's estate in Arizona.

Radford had a singular experience the next day after the wedding. He went into Bullen's room to inquire about his progress, and stopped with a genial greeting at the foot of the bed.

But the moment Bullen heard his name spoken by the man who had meant merely to extend a common courtesy, he became so excited and uttered the uncanny noises which took the place of speech so loudly that Miss Thorpe drove Radford out of the sick-room.

Ted was embarrassed by the occurrence. He resented the treatment. He liked to be liked, and had not consciously done anything to Bullen to deserve the malignant outburst.

When Miss Thorpe came into the

hall he felt it necessary to explain away the impression that Bullen's actions must have created.

"You would think I had injured him in some way, Miss Thorpe," he observed.

"He does seem to get excited when you come in, Mr. Radford," the nurse replied.

"I can't see why. I haven't done him any wrong in the world," Ted protested.

"Sick people have strange fancies," said Miss Thorpe noncommittally.

But Ted received the impression that Miss Thorpe placed more credence in Bullen's actions than in his own words; and she hurried to the telephone in the hall to call Stratton before he could do anything to correct her idea.

Another experience awaited him, scarcely less disagreeable. He had an engagement to join Bess and take her to something or other. It had been substituted for the call he had asked to make, during which he meant to lay the unpleasant state of affairs before Bess. But she had other uses for her time and him, it appeared later.

With Mrs. Hetherington chaperoning and wholly blocking any effort he might make to get Bess alone and tell her something of his affairs, he was dragged to a Thé Dansant where half of society was rounded up before departing for new dissipations in the country. He could see that Mrs. Hetherington was reveling splendidly in trailing him about since he was shining with the enhanced brilliancy due to his mother's multimillionaire marriage.

In spite of himself, he enjoyed the thought of discomfiture which would come to the ambitious Mrs. Hetherington when she found that she had really displayed a penniless dependent, instead of a rich man, heir to more millions. But he had not the slightest opportunity to let Bess in on the secret of his amusement. Indeed, the fun was subtly squeezed from the situation when he thought of telling her.

Another day passed, and he was still, in the eyes of the world and his *fiancée,* rich young Radford with Barrington prospects. At three o'clock in the afternoon a messenger from Mr. Marsh brought a small parcel of papers to him. He was in the library when they came, and, without looking at them, he signed the receipt and thrust them into his coat-pocket.

He was in no mood to read over the worthless documents which merely emphasized his poverty by contrasting it with the affluence which the papers were probably intended to have represented.

A wire came within two hours from his mother, telling him that Bess was coming out to Cressymere for a visit and for him to come at once. He had his things put into a suit-case, ordered his roadster, and started, but without any agreeable anticipations, out to the millionaire's estate.

The visit would afford him a chance to talk with his mother, to tell her that he could not bring himself to be a dependent on her husband, and an opportunity to tell Bess how things really stood.

At half past five Miss Thorpe, seeing her patient asleep, started out for a short walk. But Natalie met her almost at the door; and her constitutional became a brief fifteen-minute affair because beauty-loving Natalie begged her to return to the Fifth Avenue house and give her a glimpse of its luxury.

Miss Thorpe returned to Bullen's room when she had sent Natalie home. It was deserted.

Though Bullen was much stronger, and had even insisted on being dressed, the empty bed where he had been stretched when she left filled her with alarm. He might have tried his legs by walking in the halls.

She ran out and looked for him on the floor where he had roomed, on the one below, even through the intricacies of the back halls, when she noticed a door from the back stairs ajar. But he was nowhere to be found.

Frightened, she went to the door which she knew opened into Radford's suite. She knocked again and again, but received no answer. She rang for Williams and asked if Mr. Radford were at home.

On hearing that he had left the house about twenty minutes or a half-hour before, she stood irresolute; but it seemed absurd to think that he had taken the invalid who showed such an unflattering dislike for his company.

She asked the butler if Mr. Radford had gone alone, and learned that he had not seen him go, but had been told of his departure by his valet, who had not accompanied him.

Then it was that she told Williams of the disappearance of the man whose presence in the house had been kept as quiet as possible. Williams had no advice or explanations to offer; he went headlong toward the dining-room and began looking over the silver. Nothing was missing; and he took up a careful investigation of the house to find that the north basement-door was unlocked.

It was the only route by which Bullen could have left the house without running a great risk of being seen. And it was the one he would probably have chosen, as the door communicating with the back stairs was nearest his room.

Miss Thorpe went back to the bedroom. Then she thought for the first time of the key which Bullen had kept under his pillow. She looked, and it was gone. But in its place was a leaf from Radford's address-book and a pile of bills.

She stared at the money for a second, not daring to touch it. Then she picked up the bit of paper and read what was scrawled on it.

"Soze you kin clean out them cowboys and beasts," was what she saw.

The money was for Natalie. She picked it up and counted it with growing, breathless wonder. She sank on the edge of the bed, weak with the sudden fortune that had come to her little friend. There was one thousand dollars in good, real bills.

Dr. Stratton came while she sat contemplating the windfall and wondering if she dared break the news of her good fortune to Natalie, if there was no risk of the money being taken into the keeping of some one who might consider it still belonged to her patient.

Stratton had barely seen the bills and heard of Bullen's departure when he dashed across the room to the chiffonier. The drawer was open and the belt and money gone.

"Have you told Mr. Radford?" he asked, realizing that Bullen had taken his money, left his gift for Natalie, and gone.

"Mr. Radford isn't here," Miss Thorpe replied. "He went about the time that Mr. Bullen must have left."

Stratton instantly repressed the start that almost betrayed his surprise at her communication. Radford's confession that he was hard pressed came back to him. The presence of the man in the house which Ted had so inadequately explained exerted its influence upon his thoughts. He turned abruptly and went to Radford's rooms.

On the table there he found the wire which Mrs. Barrington had sent. He read it and was agreeably impressed that Radford's going had simply been his natural response to the invitation of his mother and the chance to be with his *fiancée*.

"Bess is coming out to visit us. Come at once. Bring all papers," was the wording of the telegram.

Stratton returned to Bullen's room, disgustedly asking himself if he was such a scamp as to rejoice in circumstances that discredited Ted because he was successful in winning the girl he, too, desired.

Miss Thorpe was fairly quivering with hope and fear alternately. She greeted him with a volley of questions.

"Do you think Natalie may have this money, doctor? You know what it would mean to her—almost life itself. She simply cannot live if she is

continually ground by poverty and the starvation of her soul. If—"

The tears were streaming down the cheeks of the usually unemotional woman. Dr. Stratton gulped at a lump in his throat and nodded before he could speak. Miss Thorpe seized his arm.

"You mean it will be all right—that I may take it to her?" she cried shrilly.

"It's a gift. I'm sure she can take it. The note will be evidence enough—if any one questions—that Bullen meant it for her," Stratton answered.

Miss Thorpe struggled with her feelings for a moment. Stratton knew what the money meant to her and to Natalie. He had seen Miss Thorpe fighting for the girl's life when a fever attacked her work-wearied, nervous little body.

"When Mr. Radford and Natalie were here Mr. Bullen mentioned Pinon, Arizona. He knew Natalie's uncle," Miss Thorpe said as she began to collect her belongings.

"Radford saw Natalie?" he asked.

"Yes. He brought her up in the elevator when she made a mistake and knocked at his door," Miss Thorpe replied, and added, with a look that showed she acted as a sort of watchdog over the little French girl—"Why do you ask?"

Stratton himself was a bit puzzled to know why he had made the inquiry. He explained that Radford was one of the tenderest-hearted men he knew—if he happened to notice. He was probably touched by Natalie's wonderful soul and the body obviously too weak for its great demands.

But the inquiry had roused the somewhat suspicious nature of the nurse. She objected, with the strength of experience, to men of Radford's kind interesting themselves in the souls of girls like Natalie.

"I'm not sure but that I share my patient's dislike for Mr. Radford," she said sharply, tucking the precious thousand dollars safely away in her suitcase and turning to the door.

"Bullen disliked Radford?" Stratton asked quickly.

"So much that he began positively terrifying when Mr. Radford tried to talk to him," Miss Thorpe answered.

The words started a new idea in Dr. Stratton's mind. If Bullen had learned of Ted's departure and had taken advantage of the only time he had been left alone since he came to the house to leave, and if he had displayed such a marked enmity toward his host, it was altogether probable that he had set out to follow Ted.

The thought fitted in with Ted's story that Bullen had suddenly appeared at the house, and it dovetailed with what he believed to be the truth though Radford did not corroborate it—that Bullen had come to avenge some score and had attacked Ted. It looked as if he meant to carry out his original intention.

Though he was weak, a man with nine thousand dollars could command services which would enable him to get wherever he wished. Stratton hurried to a telegraph-office and warned Radford that his invalid guest had suddenly disappeared.

Radford made such time that he covered the distance to Cressymere in time for the delayed dinner. Bess, his mother, and Barrington stood on a marble platform guarded by a solid wall of the same white material as he swung into the formal courtyard of the great house.

Before he was allowed to go and dress, his mother made him look over the marble ballustrade down into the pool beneath which reflected trees and wall and even their own faces in its limpid depths.

It was a marvelous place, and it helped Radford in the dinner conversation with his stepfather. It was perfectly clear to him that Barrington really wished to be liked by him. He might have unbent more easily to his advances if Bess had not shown so much eagerness in furthering his interests with the multimillionaire. By the time dinner was over Ted was in a ra-

ging anger and scornful with disgust. He could no more have made one conscious effort to be agreeable to Barrington than he could have flown.

A rankling hatred of the money-chase had taken possession of him.

When his mother asked if he had remembered to bring the papers she mentioned, he told her that he had, with an inward determination that he would keep possession of his own worthless affairs even if he had to be boorish.

Barrington observed casually that he would be glad to look at any papers Ted might have.

"I think there's really only one paper that ever had much value," Radford was forced to reply. "And it has lost it—so Marsh assures me."

"What is it?" Barrington asked unconcernedly.

"Mining stock, I think. I haven't even looked at it," Radford answered.

"Why, Ted, Mr. Barrington knows all there is to know about mines!" Bess exclaimed, with a warning lift to her black brows that promised Ted a good reprimand for his stupid coldness toward the man he should have tried to win.

"The papers are in my clothes up-stairs," Radford remarked with a curtness that short-stopped the conversation.

Goaded by his sudden dislike for his stepfather, by the rebellion of his better nature against the thought of being dependent on him, Ted exploded a bomb, almost as unexpectedly to himself as to the others:

"I'm going West—for a while."

"West?" his mother and Bess exclaimed, while Barrington fixed him with the boring grip of his keen eyes that seemed to be digging into his very brain and excavating his thoughts.

"Yes. I want to try my hand at work—for a change," he said.

He saw the quick look of understanding in his mother's eyes; and he noted the sullen little pout of Bess's pink lips.

"It—it isn't necessary, you know, Ted," his mother said.

"Yes, it is. My nature cries out for the big open," he answered half jestingly. "And I'll leave to-morrow morning, I think."

He had not thought of any such hasty departure; but now that he had crossed his bridge, he enjoyed burning it behind him. But his *fiancée* was thoroughly enraged.

Mrs. Barrington thoughtfully propelled her husband away from the corridor when Bess led him out, preparatory to beginning the examination into his motives that she thought necessary.

Half in a spirit of bravado, half because he had begun to sense the differences that divided them and their real interests, he fixed his attention with the enjoyment of a connoisseur on a great red lacquer vase.

Bess refused to be interested in its marvelous glaze. She read him a lecture on his rudeness to Barrington.

"If you think I'm going to kotow to my mother's husband just for the sake of his money, you are wrong!" he exclaimed after he had endured her reproaches long enough. "If I need money I'll make it or steal it, but you can make up your mind I won't beg it."

It was a veritable quarrel that followed. Ted was bitterly conscious that Bess had little use for him except as the man to whom a big fortune was appended. He started to tell her he was a poor man and wanted her to consider herself free if it was agreeable when his mother came and interrupted them.

He made his farewells, grimly insisting that he would be gone before they were up. He arranged for his car at a fiendishly early hour. And he fell asleep in a state of mind so different from the depressed misery he had experienced since he knew of his change of fortune that he was convinced of the wisdom of his decision.

It seemed to him that morning had come very suddenly when he was suddenly conscious of the light on his face. He wrestled with a desire for a few winks more and leaped out of bed.

He heard the door closed softly and

realized that he was in the pitchy blackness of midnight. There was not a trace of dawn. He stumbled toward the switch and flashed on the light.

His bags, packed for his early departure, were all right. He opened one and took out a pistol, then hurried into the hall, switching off the light as he went. He was sure some one had been in his room and gone out by the hall door.

Some one was coming along the padded route. Radford could just see him in the faint light from some night-lamp on the wall. He waited. The man was just in front of him. He moved forward and pressed the pistol accurately over his heart.

"Holy saints! I'm the butler!" the man gasped.

Ted dragged him in his room and found out that it was true. He told of the intruder.

"It's time to get up, sir. I came to tell ye. Your coffee's ready in the breakfast-room, sir," the man stammered, not over his fright.

Radford ordered him to get the night-watch and make a search of the house, and to report the visit of the prowler to Mr. Barrington.

He dressed, breakfasted, and went to his car. No trace of the intruder of the night had been found.

At three o'clock in the afternoon Radford went aboard a west-bound train, unattended by any of the friends or the luxuries of his days of wealth.

At ten minutes after three Bess Hetherington leaned over the marble balustrade and looked down into the pool.

She saw a man lying face downward in the shallow water, just at the edge of the pool and at the bottom of the terrace wall.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO GUARD A SECRET.

For one horrified second Bess looked down at the form so rigid and clear in the water. Then she turned and ran toward two gardeners at work in the flower-beds.

"Come! Come at once!" she gasped, trembling and white.

The men straightened up from their work and gazed at her, confused. Then they appeared to recover their wits.

"What's wrong, miss?"

Bess started back, scarcely knowing what she did, and the men followed her. She pointed silently over the balustrade. The next moment they rushed toward a flight of steps that descended to the pool.

As she leaned over the marble coping she saw her own face reflected, the image falling across the real figure of the man in the water. She started back, while the men dragged the drowned man to the grassy bank.

Bess gathered her courage and forced herself forward to peer again over the wall. The stiff figure lay on the grass, with white, upturned face, and Bess gasped aloud as she saw it.

Wild with the desire to be sure that she saw aright, she stumbled down the steps and ran toward the water. Her first glance had told her the truth. This was the man she had seen lying on the davenport in the library of Mrs. Barrington's Fifth Avenue house.

Ten minutes before she had been raged at her own stupidity. She had acknowledged that she had literally driven Radford away by her persistent nagging. She had looked clearly into the matter and had seen that she had counted too much upon his devotion, had scolded him beyond the limit of his patience. He had gone off without so much as leaving her a note of farewell, and she was too much her mother's daughter not to worry lest she had driven even good-natured Frederick Radford to the point where the lover assumes the worm's prerogative, and turns.

He was too decidedly the choice of the men she knew for her to feel comfortable in having risked his good-

will. But every thought of him fled from her mind in the first minutes of her terrible discovery, to return with awful meaning when she recognized the shabby gray suit, the high-heeled boots, the red tie, of the dead man.

This was certainly the man she had seen with Ted and about whom she she had questioned her *fiancé*, only to receive answers that left her doubting.

Had Ted's hasty departure anything to do with the appearance of this man who had sought him in town? The question turned Bess cold and faint with horror. Was Ted to blame for the man's being thrown into the water? In a moment of anger had he sought to punish him for his continued intrusion?

Animated by the spirit of fear that possessed her, Bess imagined that Radford had made his early start, come out of the house, only to find that the individual he wanted to escape was there to confront him.

She could almost see the struggle which might have carried them across the court and to the wall. Why Radford should have thrown his assailant over the balustrade to certain death in the pool she could not imagine; but neither could she understand why he had struck him the blow that had necessitated his remaining in the town house when he came there on the day of the wedding.

There was some mystery back of the persistent way in which the man sought Ted, and it had culminated in her finding the man dead in the pool at the base of the wall. Had Radford killed him?

The question pounded through her brain till she was almost distracted. Only the sight of the serious faces of the gardeners looking at her for directions made her focus all her will to speak to them.

"Will you stay here till I find Mr. Barrington?" she asked.

They consented with a reluctance for which she did not blame them. She went with uneven steps and scarcely seeing eyes up the flight of steps and toward the house.

She almost crept into the entrance, dreading lest she encounter Mrs. Barrington. She felt that she could not tell her what had happened. It was sufficiently dreadful to have the man lying dead at the very foot of the terrace that Mrs. Barrington loved, bad enough to have the first days of her stay in the beautiful home darkened by such an occurrence; but the awfulness of the mother's gradual realization that her son was in some sinister way connected with the dead man simply took every atom of strength from Bess's body. She leaned weakly against the wall and panted as if she had been running.

Gradually, more because the place where she was was so conspicuous and she might be seen than because of any great accession of strength or courage, she made her way along the corridor toward the pergola at the southern end of the house, where Mr. Barrington usually read and smoked.

Just as she caught sight of Barrington outside she noticed that a maid was engaged near the red lacquer vase. As she neared her the girl held up something. Bess started.

"It frightened me, too, miss, when I saw it coiled in the vase," the girl hastened to explain.

She held the snaky-looking thing up for inspection; but Bess stopped barely long enough to see that it was a rarely fine snakeskin belt. Then she went on, intent upon the painful mission.

"Mr. Barrington, there's a man—dead—at the foot of the wall!" she whispered, her nerves almost at breaking point.

Barrington's paper fell from his hand. He looked at her with eyes so surprised and lips so still that Bess was stirred to resentment.

"Don't sit there staring! You'll have to tell the men what to do with the body!" she exclaimed.

His surprise and the look of absolute fright in his face scarcely lessened;

but he rose slowly and started along the brick pavement to a flight of steps that descended to the lawn. Bess followed him, the horrible fascination of fear and morbid curiosity on her. She saw him go to the wall and look over.

She heard him exclaim. He leaned against the marble bulwark as if his strength had deserted him. Bess, a bit more used to the awfulness of the affair, could see that he was even more overcome than she had been.

He turned and glanced toward the house, and she fancied that the horror of having his wife know what had occurred beyond the marble banister filled him with dread.

"I—I can't believe it!" he came to her and whispered hoarsely.

"Well, it's true," Bess said sharply, feeling that he must be stimulated to assume command of the two men, who were looking up expectantly from their post beside the body. "You'll have to let the police know—the officer who looks after things of this kind."

"Yes, yes—the coroner. It's unbelievable!" he replied, still returning to the thought that seemed to hypnotize him.

"It—isn't it possible to do it quietly? It will make such an amount of talk! Mrs. Barrington—" Bess stopped, too much overcome to go on suggesting that the man's death might be accounted for in some way that would prevent investigation.

"I'll see about it," Barrington replied, dragging himself together with an effort at the mention of his wife's name. "Tell the men to stay till the doctor can get here."

He walked toward the house with firm step and a reassuring return of his accustomed manner. Bess instructed the men and dragged toward the house. She moved as if her young limbs were impeded by heavy weights.

As she reached a point opposite Mr. Barrington's office the butler came hurrying out. One glance at his face told her that he had heard the news of the ghastly find beneath the terrace.

"Mr. Barrington told you—" she began, so surprised at the random retailing of the dead man's proximity that she could scarcely believe that her host had actually communicated it.

"Yes, Miss Hetherington. It just proves what I told him," he answered, excited out of his formal manner.

"What was that?" she asked quickly.

"About the burglar."

Bess's eyes opened wide and stared her question at the man.

"Yes, Miss Hetherington, there was a burglar. He was in Mr. Radford's room, and when I went to wake him, Mr. Radford mistook me for him and nearly killed me, ma'am."

Bess listened to the somewhat confused information with her lips so dry that she could not speak.

"I told Mr. Barrington, as Mr. Radford said I should. Now they've found the burglar. He was likely getting away, Miss Hetherington, and mistook the balustrade for a fence. He must have climbed over, then fell in the water, and drowned."

Bess listened to the butler, who had amateur detective instincts, with one part of her brain. The other was going over the facts that Radford had been out of his room in the night, had been surprised in the hall by the butler, and had said that he was looking for a burglar.

"Was nothing of Mr. Radford's taken?" she asked.

"No, Miss Hetherington. Nothing was even disturbed. The burglar must just have come in when he waked up and scared him away," the man replied.

Bess Hetherington's whole heart voiced a strange cry at the sound of the butler's words. If Ted had only not persistently disguised the truth, if he had only trusted her a bit, if he had given her a chance to believe the best of him!

But her mind now instantly leaped at the conclusion that Ted's explanation of the burglar — who disturbed

nothing of his belongings — was his quick effort to explain his absence from his room.

She knew it was next to impossible for the dead man to have secured entrance to the house; but she imagined that Ted had seen him prowling about and gone out to settle with him.

Whether he had, as the butler's words suggested to her, driven the man out through the darkness till he stumbled against the wall and took it for a fence over which he might climb, she could not guess; but the conviction had positive hold upon her that Ted Radford was responsible for the death of the man.

Almost overcome by the hurrying horror of events, she managed to get to her own room. She flung herself on a couch, shaking and wretched. For all her worldly wisdom Bess Hetherington was a child in real knowledge of herself and of life.

The despair, the aching sympathy she felt for Mrs. Barrington, the deep hurt to her own pride, were all sensations so new that she could only submit to their intensity; she could not understand. Her real self was beginning to grow, and the pain of the delayed development was overpowering.

She cared for Radford. The delightful atmosphere of admiration with which he had the knack of surrounding a woman who interested him had grown perfect in its subtle appeal when he was with her.

He had a sense of humor that made him master of situations where his ease or daring did not suffice. She had felt a pride in him as a lover which had perhaps made it easier for her mother to carry out her ambitions. If he had been crabbed, selfish, lacking in the good looks that a girl likes, she might have refused, even with the lure of his fortune, to accept him.

She sobbed miserably at the downfall of her hopes and her ideal of the man whom she had contemplated marrying without loving. Suddenly her mind cleared a bit. She knew she would never have realized that she did not love Ted if it had not been for that extraordinary upheaval of the things deep in her nature at the mention of Stratton's name, if they had not had that brief moment alone in the elevator.

The thought stimulated something in her that was as new as other crowding emotions to her—loyalty to Ted. At least, she must do what she could to save him, to spare his mother. She jumped up and went to the telephone, asking for long distance.

She was connected with the Fifth Avenue house. Williams answered. He told her that Mr. Radford had come home from the country, packed his shooting things, and left town, without giving an address by which to reach him.

Bess hung up with a long breath of relief. At least Ted was putting distance between himself and his misdeed. Perhaps he did not even know that the man he had driven from the house had drowned in the pool.

That last thought comforted her. After all, what motive could a man in Ted's position have for killing one so obviously from an entirely different sphere of life, and even from such a remote part of the world as his clothes indicated?

At five o'clock she was summoned to Mr. Barrington's office. A local doctor and the coroner were there. They had made their examination and the body had been removed by a route through the trees which prevented any one from the house observing it.

"I have not mentioned this sad affair to Mrs. Barrington," Barrington said, as she came in and took the chair he placed for her. "The doctor says the man must have fallen and drowned. There is no sign of any recent hurt, no wound from a weapon. I am right, doctor?"

The physician nodded. The coroner nodded.

"The man had a wound on his forehead, but it was healing. He had evi-

dently been sick and was too weak to save himself after the fall," the doctor added.

Bess felt herself turn pale. The recollection of the blood-smeared forehead of the man as he lay in the library came back to her; she knew who had given that wound.

"You discovered the body, miss?" the coroner asked.

Bess bowed her head; she could not speak.

"The man was a stranger to you both?" he inquired, looking from one to the other.

Bess raised her eyes to Barrington. A look from him made her thrill as if some sharp instrument had pricked her. She knew that he suspected that the man was not wholly unknown to her.

She bowed her head again to the coroner's question while she asked herself again and again whether Barrington did not suspect that the dead man was not merely an unknown and burglariously inclined person.

Did he know that the son of the woman he was so intent upon protecting from the shock of knowing about the tragedy of the terrace was acquainted with the victim?

Bess resolutely shut her teeth together and summoned her wits. She suspected that she was getting too fanciful; that the events had unseated her common sense and left her weak in the grasp of her own imaginings.

She heard Barrington discussing the affair. She gathered that it was to be treated with all possible secrecy.

"But, Mr. Barrington, the butler and the two men know—" she exclaimed.

"I have explained to the butler the advisability of not letting the servants know. He understands the difficulties of keeping them if any uncanny associations should alarm them or awake their superstitions. He will tell the gardeners to keep their own counsel."

As Mr. Barrington held open the door for her she paused and started to speak of the butler's story of the burglar. But she thought better of it. Barrington had talked with the butler. He had possibly already made such use of the story as seemed wisest.

But, in that instant's hesitation she saw again in the millionaire's keen eyes that hint of knowledge other than he had openly expressed. She went on, weary and wondering.

It seemed to her that from that day on she was to live in constant fear of the word or the look or the unexpected event which would disturb the hornet's nest which would loosen its stings of disgrace and suffering on Frederick Radford and those connected with him.

At dinner Mrs. Barrington deserved more than ever the title for beauty which she had held successfully for years. Barrington was more infatuated than ever, obviously. Bess felt depressed and unequal to her share in the conversation.

"Bess, you're not angry with Ted for going off so suddenly? He has always been so impetuous," Mrs. Barrington said.

"Not at all," Bess replied, her nervousness seeking a girl's natural route to expression through sarcasm. "I think it's a good thing he went—just when he did!"

She could have bitten her tongue out the next moment. Barrington's wife looked half amused at the girlish pique; but Bess saw that Barrington was finding deeper meaning in her words than she wanted him to see.

"You think it's a good time to go—at dawn?" he asked.

"I think he's horrid not to have said good-by, at least!" she fussed, determined to make her former words seem merely the outburst of an offended sweetheart.

"Dawn's pretty early to get up and out—unless one has a reason," Barrington observed with the casual manner that can be so alarmingly suggestive to one who has something to dread.

Bess studiously kept her eyes from

meeting the eyes of Mr. Barrington. But the conviction took possession of her that he knew something of Ted's connection with the man who had been drowned at the foot of the terrace wall.

His protracted silence goaded her into words, and she felt that she blundered miserably in her efforts at conversation. She grew to fear the silent, keen man who listened.

With all her heart, the heart so lonely in the neglect it had endured while she overcultivated and coddled her pride, she longed for the comfort of confidence with the one man on whom, for Ted's sake and her own, she might depend.

A pretense of a headache enabled her to escape. She glanced from her bedroom window and shuddered. Hugo Barrington and his wife were strolling, loverlike, along the walk by the marble balustrade.

She rang for her maid, and the girl who had dusted the red lacquer vase appeared, apologizing for the absence of the other. Bess asked her what she had done with the snake-skin belt.

"I gave it to Mr. Barrington's man. Mr. Barrington has it now," was the answer.

Bess's thoughts wandered in labyrinthine ways. Her better self, so long neglected, shivered faintly with repulsion against the idea of marriage with a man who either intentionally or inadvertently had the death of a fellow-being on his hands and conscience.

Her accustomed habit of thought drove her to overlook the higher voice and acquiesce to the worldly advantageous union. So long as there was no investigation; so long as Ted Radford's sinister connection with the death of the Westerner was unknown, she could not bring herself to relinquish the wealth and social position which she would enjoy as his wife.

The wise thing for her to do was to suppress in every possible way any curiosity about the death of the unknown Mr. Bullen. It flashed into her mind, like a gleam of encouragement, that Barrington was certain to do the same thing because of his wife.

Bess thought with mingled feelings of the interview she must have with Midge Stratton. He must be put in possession of the facts and cautioned about his references to Radford and Bullen.

She fell asleep, comforted. Frederick Radford would be protected from exposure by the ambition of his *fiancée;* by the devotion of Barrington to his mother, and by Midge Stratton's fidelity.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER ARIZONA STARS.

FREDERICK RADFORD left New York with a complete gentleman's sporting wardrobe and equipment. He had no notion of where he was going—simply West.

As he approached the part of the country which spreads with such royal generosity of extent over the accommodating western part of the continent, he began to realize that he must decide on a destination.

But he had been occupied with many disagreeable thoughts before he roused to appreciate the fine flavor of the air that wafted from the Rockies into the Pullman. He had spent the days trying to make out why he was out of sorts with the idea of marrying. He ended by simply admitting the fact and trying to rid himself of the intuitions that had led up to it.

With the rising nature of his hopes he soon adjusted himself to the delightful notion that he was out on a courtship of the unexpected. He admitted himself eager to woo the goddess of fortune and adventure rather than any concrete and lovely lady.

It was only after he had actually taken the train that he realized he had quite failed to make any arrangements for Mr. Bullen. Williams had had no chance to tell him of the Westerner's going. He had done his small share

at assisting to get the young man off, and had observed that the wardrobe and sporting paraphernalia suggested a hunting-trip. It did not occur to him that Radford was leaving for good.

The hundred dollars from his small store of cash, Radford had handed over to the butler with instructions to settle any small bills he might have neglected,' had impressed Williams pleasantly; and he had considered it mere courtesy not to bring the unpleasant subject of Mr. Bullen in the way of the departing master of the house.

That four hundred dollars with which he left New York had a brief and eventful history. He had about as much idea of how to economize it as a skylark has of being niggardly with the melody which is its very breath.

Two months later he traded off his shot-gun for a cow-pony of uncertain qualities and started out of the town of Piñon, Arizona, to get a bread-and-butter job as puncher for Silsby, one of the two big cow-men of the country.

He had worked in a mine in New Mexico till he acquired a kind of intelligence about the business. He had spent and lost his money. But he was not downcast.

He had followed a leading, the memory of the little French girl and her 'Oncle's estate' near Piñon, with the same satisfaction that possessed him as he followed the brown ribbon of road across the plains.

Indeed, he was rather set-up about himself than otherwise. He had met men face to face and fist to fist, not to mention eye to eye with pistol-barrels as the line of vision; and he had found himself out. He was not so bad a man after all.

He grinned now at the recollection of the first fight. A big fellow with squinting blue eyes along either side of a well-tilted nose had brushed against him and leaped wildly aside, pretending to be hamstrung by the creases which still edged his trousers sharply.

The big man took his appreciation of the humor of his performance as a sign that the tenderfoot had not the courage to resent an affront. He repeated his antics till Radford's blue eyes began to blaze.

"Look here! Stop your monkeying or you'll get sure hurt!" he threatened.

He had seen the men draw closer, interested.

"You mind your own business and you'll save yourself!" he went on as the big chap persisted.

"This hyah's my vaycation! I ain't got nuthin' to do but keep myself amused," was the drawling reply while the six-shooter and the big brown hand got friendly.

"Here's something entertaining!" Ted replied, making the famous plunge that had won him football laurels.

He upset the miner neatly in the dusty road while the pistol wasted fire on the large empty air about them.

"Say, pardner," the man sat up to remark admiringly, "you teach me that there cute little trick an' I'll pay fur the crease in yer pants and help ye keep 'em nice."

Radford accepted the apology, taught the trick, and spent the last of his four hundred celebrating his own victory at the bar. But he did not begrudge it. He was grateful for every happening that revealed the elemental stuff of manhood in him.

He began to recover from the belittling feeling that he was a kind of male lily of the field that could not toil nor earn its salt. He was finding himself, and, with a becoming humility, he gratefully acknowledged he was finding himself rather better than he had expected.

A month before his unimpressive arrival at Piñon, Arizona, Alice Thorpe had superintended the lifting of a tiny figure on a stretcher from the baggage-car of the train. It was little Natalie le Fevre.

With the money that Bullen had left

to make it possible, Natalie and Alice had come out into the land of mystery to seek "Oncle Phillipe's estate."

To Miss Thorpe's practical nature it had seemed a kind of rainbow chase. She did not believe much in Phillipe le Fevre and his heritage to his niece. But Natalie was about to pay the price that poverty exacts from a nature like hers, and Alice Thorpe undertook the trip, knowing that only an absolute change would restore the imaginative, ill-nourished, sensitive little girl to health.

She believed that Oncle Phillipe had concocted his amiable fairy-tale of a fine estate near Piñon, from which he had been driven by the "beasts of men," simply and solely to gloss over his imposition of himself and his voracious appetite on the hard-working little maker of ribbon-flowers.

Providence had mercifully removed Oncle Phillipe, evidently preferring to leave Natalie a chance at the good things of the world on which her uncle had imposed.

But Natalie was a girl of the peculiarly sensitive temperament who lived soul first, instead of body; and she had been starved of the refinement of surroundings, the cultured associations which were hers in France, till her poor little body had almost given up trying to exist with the soul-hunger gnawing at its energies.

Alice had encouraged the dream of the estate, and had urged the journey to Piñon because her trained eyes saw that only fresh air, warm, golden light, leisure, and hope could cure the girl she had grown to love with the intensity of a heart denied its natural mother career.

When they reached the point in the journey where the luxury of Pullman was left, Natalie had been unable to sit up. Her great eyes burned into Miss Thorpe's with a fear that she was not to reach the promised land.

Alice had exerted all the force of her mind and practical experience to supply a means by which they might go on. So the cot in the baggage-car had been arranged.

The lounging cow-men about the station saw the cot set out of the car with wondering interest. Two of them started forward when the woman stood alone and uncertain beside the still figure on the bed.

"Excuse me, madam, but mebbe we kin he'p you."

Alice turned to the deliverer. Her civilization-trained eyes lost a bit of their terror at the crudeness of things when they encountered the kindly glances that the foreman of Mat Gill's ranch was turning from her to Natalie.

"Would you lift her out of the sun? It's so hot!" she said.

Instantly young Sykes stepped to the head of the cot while Frank Benson took up the foot. They swung the little French girl along as lightly as the breeze might have borne her.

Something in the vigor and easy harmony of the motion startled her from the apathy of endurance which had enabled her to stand the bumping and creaking of the baggage-car. She lifted her dark head from the pillow and smiled with the soft splendor of her deep eyes, too large and too pathetically bright.

Benson grinned.

"Hello, kid! You'll get well in a hurrah out hyah!" he announced.

Natalie pushed herself up on her pillow as if the promise strengthened her.

"Thank you, *monsieur*," she responded as the color leaped into her cheeks.

The cowboys had come closer. Natalie had been mistaken for a child by them as well as by Frank Benson. The foreman was one of the gawky, kindly men to whom a ceremonious title fitted as illy as a velvet violin-cover would have suited a cast-iron frying-pan.

But the "*monsieur*" of the little invalid made him straighten up and try to look the part. The cowboys snorted at his pretensions and guffawed

at "*monshure,*" while Benson cringed under the ridicule, knowing he could never recover from the title.

Natalie gazed at the roaring men with eyes that blazed. A silence fell over them as, one by one, they looked and saw her; she had blossomed into color and animation as vivid as one of the flaming cactus-flowers of the deserts.

"I am Natalie le Fevre," she said almost as if she defied them to acknowledge so distinguished a person that they were daring to laugh at anything connected with her. "I have come to take possession of my inheritance from my Oncle Phillipe le Fevre."

Benson dropped his lower jaw and almost dropped his end of the cot. The men around uttered surprised exclamations. Only Tom Sykes, his eyes fastened on the brilliant little girl, seemed unsurprised by the announcement.

"Frenchy Fill-up," Benson said at last, as if he needed to put into words the nickname that was in his mind. "You ain't Frenchy—"

He went no further. Natalie was looking at him with little red-brown flames of wrath darting from her eyes.

"You are one of the beasts!" she accused. "You may not help me! Put down the cot!"

Sheer inability to make the lightning mental change she suggested, to realize that she was storming at him who had been smiling, he hung on to the cot.

She leaped from it like a bird driven from its nest and raging in its small way at the indignity.

"I weel not be carried by heem!" she cried as Alice tried to soothe her. "You are the cowboys who do not know what ees fine and delicate! When my oncle offered you the hospitality of hees fine house you make fun and insult heem! You have driven heem from hees home, and he ees dead. But I am hees niece. Do you think I weel let you help me? *Non, non!*"

Benson drooped in the fire of her scorn. The others shifted and quietly crowded behind each other when a chance offered.

"Oh, I see you! You cannot hide, you beeg cowboy!" she scoffed. "You are the large beasts not knowing that the beauty and the elegance are food for your souls. You have no soul, perhaps! Eets would be better to feed them, eef you had, than to fatten your beeg, ugly bodies!"

Natalie was sounding the key-note of her philosophy of life. Benson thought she must have overfed her own soul and dieted her frail little body that trembled and throbbed and glowed as if it were being assailed by the liberty-craving soul of her. He was not offended at being called a large, ugly beast.

It struck him that that was what they all looked like compared to the slim, fine, vibrating little lady whose eyes were like brown jewels and whose skin was so thin and white that it almost showed her thoughts right through.

"I—say, I wuz at Frenchy Fill-up's—"

Again the little lady stopped his blundering speech. No apology was permitted if it began in that way.

"Call heem not that name evaire again! I weel not permit it!"

If any of the men saw any humor in the slip of a girl, upheld by her indomitable spirit, bossing them so vigorously, they did not show it. They looked preternaturally grave. Sykes pulled his sombrero off of his crisp, dark hair and swept them with a glance that read their sentiments.

"It's a go, boys! Never again! No Frenchy Fill-up for ours! Say?" he shouted.

"Never again!" was the unanimous reply as shabby felt hats flew into the bright-yellow air.

The men looked at Natalie, expecting approval. But she regarded them sternly, her face white and the fire in her eyes quite dead.

"Eet ees just," she observed; and

the men had a cheap feeling that they had looked for praise where they were merely doing their duty.

Natalie suddenly put her thin hand to her forehead; and, the next moment, she had crumpled up on the edge of the cot. Tom Sykes and Benson carried her into the station.

Alice questioned them about accommodations in the straggling, dust-brown town. There was a boarding-house. But she hoped for little as she inspected the frame structures along the main street—the one street—of Piñon.

"Where do you live?" she asked Benson suddenly.

"Me? Out to the Double X Ranch."

Sykes was quicker. He told Miss Thorpe that they passed near the house of Phillipe le Fevre on their way home.

"We come in a wagon, miss, an' we kin take ye out," the young fellow said eagerly. "They ain't no place in this hyah hole whar I'd want a sisteh uv mine to stay. Le Fevre jes' walked off an' left his house, you know. It'd be a heap morah comfortable fuh ye than anything in Piñon. It gits purty rough hyah on Saturday nights."

Alice put her finger on her lips. She led the two men outside the station. If Natalie waked from the stupor into which she had relapsed and discovered that she was to be served by the "cowboy beasts," the plan for getting away from the hot, ugly little town would be impossible.

"There really is a house—a place where we could live?" Miss Thorpe questioned, anxious to hear corroboration of "Oncle Phillipe's" claim.

"You bet!" Sykes exclaimed. "It's some house! It's a darned hard climb, but it's fine when ye git thar."

Alice took the matter into her own capable hands. She gave Natalie a sedative, and the men stowed her comfortably among the flour-sacks that loaded their wagon.

When the little invalid opened her eyes she was looking deep into a night-sky as blue as the Madonna's mantle in the great pictures of the Louvre. Great, joyful stars shot down at her, then went back to get new silver glory from the light behind the sky. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. Still the silver stars played their marvelous game above her.

"Stop! Stop!" she cried.

The reins in Benson's hands were clutched and drawn taut. Sykes galloped up beside the wagon. Both men clapped hands to their revolvers.

"What's up?" Benson asked after he had swept the rolling foot-hills with a glance that took in everything in sight.

"Eet ees so beautiful! How wind sings! Listen!"

They did listen—those two men with their guns in their hands. Probably Benson thought the first sentimental thought of his life just then. It was that the sick girl was feeding her soul.

Young Tom Sykes drew his horse back so he could see the glorified face of the invalid. Perched on a flour-bag, with her slim hands pressed hard against her breast as if her beauty-loving heart were almost ready to burst with the loveliness of the night, Natalie le Fevre came into her own. At dawn she was still gazing, and the ineffable colors, the rose and pearl and green and gray, turned the tears in her ecstasied eyes to opalescent drops.

"Durned ef I didn't think she seen some uv Silsby's men when she made such a fuss!" Benson confided to Sykes as he fried the bacon for breakfast. Tom Sykes did not reply. He was dreaming—with the coffee-pot in his brown hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT APACHE SPRING.

Big Red of the Mesquite Ranch hired Radford with too much gratitude to question closely his short seasoning as a cow-puncher. In the days that followed Ted got a schooling that made him tired but happy.

Silsby, the owner of the Mesquite, had gone off westward, swearing vengeance on the Gill bunch. He was in the black rage that made him famous in the country. Anything, beast or boy, of the Double X that happened to come on his trail stood the best chance of speedy dissolution possible.

A bunch of his cattle had disappeared. The Double X-ers were blamed, and it was actually an armed posse of cow-men who could shoot too straight for the comfort of their enemies that accompanied the ranch-owner to the western limits of his range.

Big Red, the foreman, was short-handed, and took Radford gladly. In the close association that the heavy work made necessary Radford was soon imbued with the hatred of the Double X-ers and loyalty to the Mesquite. Gill of the Double X was plainly a human hog who grabbed at every advantage and kept hunting for more in the spots where Silsby wanted to feed his steers.

Dog-tired, Radford slid from his horse in front of the ranch-house and let his weary pony amble off toward the corral. He had been in the sun and dust all day, herding cattle possessed of all the devils that could get into them. The smell of bacon came to him invitingly.

Suddenly his eyes fastened on a dark spot approaching from the east. He watched, not yet familiar with the various objects that might come up from the horizon and into the neighborhood of the ranch-house.

The dark spot grew and grew. Then he knew that only a bunch of cattle could cover so much space and move so quickly. His first thought was that the lost herd for which Silsby had gone to search was coming back. But the cattle were far to the west and would scarcely have made such a détour as to be approaching from the east.

He ran toward the corral, shouting for Big Red. But already half a dozen cowboys were perched on the high fence, staring at the dark spot. Big Red was among them. He suddenly burst into a flood of language that commanded the attention of the others.

"Them critters is a comin' from the Apache Spring!" he concluded.

A mumble of surprise and gathering anger ran along the row of cowboys.

"Gill's fellers is a drivin' 'em off, confound 'em!"

Big Red steadily assumed a deeper and deeper tinge of the color that had gained him his name. His originally fair face blazed under the tan till it looked ready to set fire to his features, and his hair gave the impression of having its roots fed at the rage which seethed in the brain it thatched.

The Apache Spring was a liquid bone of contention. To the east it was the one place large enough to water herds of any considerable size. To both ranches, the Mesquite and the Double X, it was of great importance. It was not unusual for the cowboys to meet and fight for possession of its invaluable waters. But it was considered the decent thing not to disturb a herd when it had had possession several days and was without any of its cow-men to fight for its right.

Red guessed that the Double X-ers had heard of Silsby's absence westward and had decided to amuse themselves by interfering with the bunch of cattle quartered on the range near the spring.

It was twelve miles to the Apache waters. In ten minutes Big Red galloped off at the head of the eight punchers he could take. Radford, tired as he was, thrilled with the interest and anger of a loyal Mesquiter, led out a big black horse that Silsby himself often rode and cinched the saddle-girth with a feeling of excitement.

He galloped along with the others. He had thoroughly absorbed the ranch loyalty which was as much a part of a cow-man's life as taking the money he earned. The feeling invested a peculiarly hard kind of work with the

spirit of excitement and partizanship. Gill had not played fair.

There was not a boy among them, not one who had been punching for years, whose blood throbbed hotter or whose breath came faster than Ted Radford's when he contemplated helping to visit on the greedy Double X-ers the needed punishment.

He felt the stimulation of the big horse under him. Fifth Avenue, all that had ever happened to him there, seemed a half-forgotten dream. Out across the rolling foot-hills, stirring the dust from the roots of the grass already losing its freshness, he flew with the others. He lifted the reins and the big horse forged ahead.

The cowboys gave a hoot of half-savage joy and good-natured objection to his leadership. But they knew the horse he straddled and accepted the situation and his dust with a galloping acquiescence which brought them along close to the black's heels and kept them there, as if all of them realized the advisability of bunching in case the Double X-ers were lying in wait to attack them.

Ted had learned that it was usual for either of the ranches, when they had herds grazing near this spring, to drive up the cattle and let them drink, then drive them away for the others to have a turn.

But it was easy to assume that the Double X-ers had refused the Mesquite cattle the accustomed courtesy, and the beasts had turned and made their way to the nearest water that would be open to them, their own home ranch.

It was an inhumane piece of business to send cattle twelve miles through the heat and dust, and the cow-men had a severe code when the "critturs" were made to suffer.

"Hold on, Pretty!" Big Red yelled to Radford as they came in sight of the big spur that projected like a rock peninsula into the smoother stretch of the surrounding plain.

Radford resented the nickname, but he obeyed the instruction.

"Now's the time fur deescreetion! Git back behind somebuddy that knows how!"

Ted continued to ride along beside him.

"Say, ef ye ain't found out who's boss uv this bunch jes' ask somebuddy in the rear. Hike!" Big Red growled.

Radford debated the question about one second. He saw the blue eyes under the battered sombrero blaze. He had been riding toward the encounter with the Double X-ers joyfully, his reins held high, his hat off; but the look in Big Red's eyes rather tempered his picturesque enthusiasm.

He dropped back among the others and felt for his gun. He saw them doing the same and jamming their broad hats down on their heads. The gestures were small but curiously significant.

They plainly anticipated that the Gill men would fight to hold what they had gained. Mesquite and Double X rarely met for pleasure; there was usually business on hand and the devil to pay before the fray was over.

Radford felt a cold chill along his spine. It was a new experience to be riding a hurdle-race toward a lot of active guns ready to make holes at the slightest provocation. He was ashamed to acknowledge that just for an instant he had felt fear. Then he settled himself in the saddle and felt absolutely anxious to do his share of gun-practise.

Big Red debouched from the straight course he had been taking toward the butte that tipped the extension of the spur into the plain. Radford saw that he was making for a point where the rocky spine was lowest, a kind of sinking in the elevation, as if it rested a space to gather power to tew up the massive butte.

The mountain was not high. But, in contrast to the plain which surrounded its base, it was almost impressive in its proportions.

The men rode silently now. Dusk had come. Any moment might be the

one in which the Double X-ers would make a whirlwind sally from among the rocks, whence they could naturally see the Mesquiters, whose approach they would be expecting. A young moon shone pale in the evening sky.

They reached the spur. The way became increasingly difficult. The danger of an attack became more obvious. Every man rode with eye and gun cocked.

Big Red dismounted and led his horse. The others followed suit. Ten minutes later they hobbled the horses in a defile and crept forward again.

"Wait hyah!" Big Red suddenly ordered.

The cowboys murmured. They were eager to be at their enemies. But they obeyed, sinking down among the rocks like companion shadows to the ones that already crouched among them.

They did not talk. Radford appreciated that the situation was too serious. He lay there waiting for a signal to dash forward from Big Red. It was with some amusement that he heard his own heart apparently bouncing about inside of him, as if it had gotten away from its accustomed restriction and was making the most of it.

The men grew restless. He heard them whispering and distinguished in the exchange of mutterings that they were concerned at the long absence of Big Red. He sat up, excited all over again by the idea that the leader of the Mesquite force had been captured by the Double X-ers.

They waited longer, legs twitching and hands fingering guns. Big Red was a powerful man; but he might have been surprised and quietly captured. He might be in the hands of the Double X-ers and eagerly awaiting the advent of his own men to deliver him.

"Say, let's do something!"

It was Radford who spoke. He had come to the end of his patience. It seemed to him he would jump up and shoot in the air. It was out of question for him to lie there another moment while the great night came crawling through the rocks and the man who had become his friend was perhaps in the hands of his enemies.

"Red'll be madder'n a wet hen ef we spoil any game he's puttin' up!" one of the boys cautioned.

"Ef he's got game, he'd oughter come back an' take us in!" another grumbled.

"I'm off!" Ted suddenly yelled.

He went like a shot. The relief from inaction was so great that he utterly forgot caution, rushed ahead with only a blind idea that he was bound for the Apache Spring to kill a few dozen cowboys and liberate Big Red.

His act was like a general's when he gets away out in front and calls his men. The cowboys leaped up and after him. The rocks clattered and jumped till it sounded as if a battalion were making speed toward the spring.

"Mesquite! Mesquite!" they yelled, excited to more energy when the cry echoed and rebounded into more echoes, till it seemed as if the Double X-ers must be impressed that the whole force of the Mesquite was sweeping valiantly down upon them.

But the Double X-ers did not indicate any such impression. There was no answering challenge. It sobered the boys. They regained the caution which Ted had dislocated. They grabbed at him and hauled him back, then proceeded with more discretion.

Still nothing happened. There was no sign of Red. They began to suspect some ruse or ambush into which they were to be allowed to rush. Probably Big Red had already done it.

They reached the great breast of rock that rose between them and the spring. They rounded it carefully. The first to catch sight of the silver water in the basin leaped back so suddenly that he piled his fellows in the rear in a swearing mass.

"What in thunder's the matter?" Ted demanded as the man in front sat down on him.

"Search me!" was the wondering reply from the unexpectedly upset man.

A second pushed past the first to venture, and he fell back precipitately. Radford rushed forward in unrestrained curiosity.

He stared at a scene perfectly devoid of actors, men or beasts. Big Red was not in sight.

"Come on, you dubs; there's no one here!" he shouted.

"There's a blame-fool idiot here!" a voice like a trumpet assured him.

He turned to see Big Red sliding out from behind a rock and approaching him with anything but a gracious expression.

"Do you happen to be calling me that?" Ted demanded, lost to the interests that had brought him to the spring.

"It ain't no happenstance! I done it a purpose; an' I mean it!" Red bellowed.

It's a land of high lights, high spots, and high tempers, that wonderful country where nature paints impressionist pictures and acts like the Old Nick himself when she incorporates in man and something riles her.

Radford and Big Red flew at each other with an undiverted intensity that held the cowboys still for an instant. In that instant the mischief was done. Big Red landed a blow on Ted's carelessly presented chin that sent him reeling backward and left him, white and weak, clutching at a rock above the basin.

He tottered and swung for a second, gamely trying to rally his scattered wits to gain control of his enervated muscles. But he could not. Instead, his weaving body unbalanced the rock, which sat on the edge of a little cliff.

It shoved over into the basin. Blindly he clung to it. Before he realized what he was doing, he plunged with it into the cold waters of Apache Spring.

He sunk, thought he was drowning, struggled wildly, felt something snap in his head, and his brain cleared. He rose and found himself standing in water to his waist, while every energy he possessed was violently engaged in spitting from his protesting mouth the water he had gulped.

He coughed and strangled and gasped. The men on the rocks saw the lately indignant Big Red stare for a moment at Radford, then fall on the ground and roar and roll.

Ted kept spitting. He stood there in the cold water, apparently lost to every other interest in the world except his spitting. There was something so outlandish, so unaccountable, in his spitting and in the wildly rolling and roaring foreman that the others just stared, with open, speechless mouths.

Still Radford spat. Only now he swore, too. Finally Big Red forced his lips to utter words instead of mere noise.

"Say, ye cain't blame the critters fur goin', kin ye?" he called, only to burst into another howl.

Radford lifted his eyes. He had a moment's vision of something besides his own concerns. His blue eyes began to shine in the moonlight. The six cowboys were ranged like buzzards on a fence along the rocks, and they looked as solemn.

"Say, boys, I had a bath last week. I'll get out so you can have a drink. I know you're thirsty."

So did they. Radford waded ashore. Red sat up and rubbed his eyes, as if he wanted to see all of what might happen.

Nonplused by the situation, but eager for a drink from the celebrated spring after their hot, dusty ride, they flung themselves down full length and took great gulps of the cold water.

Simultaneously they rose and began —to spit.

CHAPTER IX.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

RADFORD sat holding his sides. He had laughed till he cried. Big Red

was silent from exhaustion. The six spitting cowboys performed with a choruslike unanimity, which was so excruciatingly funny that they began to see it themselves.

"What's the matter with it?" one demanded.

The water that had always been a boon to man and beast was so bitter that it seemed as if a barrel of green persimmons might have been ground up and poured into it.

"Some uv that gosh-darned Gill bunch has done this hyah!" Red exclaimed.

"What ef it's pizen?" a cowboy cried, going white as he spoke.

The enmity toward the Double X-ers, and a very good idea of its being returned in kind by them, made the idea a fearful one to the Mesquiters. The men gaped at each other in scared silence. It seemed an hour before Radford broke the strain.

"Nobody's devil enough to do that!" he protested.

"Ye cain't never tell 'bout them Gill coyotes!" Big Red muttered, his attention concentrated on how his stomach felt.

"I guess the cattle couldn't have tried it and traveled twelve miles to the ranch if it had been poison," Radford observed, comforted by his happy thought quite as much as he eased the others.

Big Red sprang to his feet. The fear of death removed, his big muscles ached to get into action that might result in avenging the treatment his cattle and boys had received.

"When you come buttin' in, young man, I wuz watchin' fur some one," he said to Ted, explaining the stormy welcome he had given him. "I tasted that dang stuff an' got the spittin' habit, an' I heerd somebuddy a comin' down them rocks. I ain't seen nobuddy, but they'se somebuddy a hidin' round, grinnin' at us!"

Red's words took instant effect. They stirred that especial resentment which every human being feels against the enemy who gets a chance to laugh at him. The men turned and peered about among the rocks. The spring was located in a kind of bay of the rocks, so that on three sides of it watchers might hide and observe all that happened down near the water.

Big Red snapped his suspenders against his broad breast and spoke in a cautiously lowered tone.

"Say, boys, ye jes' go off like ye wuz leavin' the spring, then prowl round an' see whut ye kin find in the rocks. Shoot ef ye want the bunch!" he drawled. "Kind uv herd in to that big, whitelike rock up yander. I got a feeling them Double X-ers needs a drink bad."

Radford sensed the seriousness under the casual words. He felt prickly and warm; it was really a man-hunt on which the boys were going. These cow-men could laugh in one breath and kill in the next. The rights of the range were maintained by the quick response of fist and gun when any one threatened to play crooked.

The cowboys scattered as nonchalantly as if they put out to find a dent in the rocks or a hollow in the ground where they could sleep agreeably. Ted turned to take his part in the hunt. But he was immediately restrained.

"Say, Pretty, ye jes' stay round hyah to see whut ye kin see," Red instructed.

Radford felt the hot blood concentrate under the band of his collar. He hated the name his good looks had fastened on him when he first came to the ranch. He had never balked a disagreeable thing or dodged a hard one. It was too much to be denied this experience, to be told to sit down and keep out of mischief and the others' way. That was what the command sounded like to him.

"I'll be hanged if I will!" he expostulated.

"Ye won't have to wait to git hung—ef ye don't!" Big Red replied instantly.

But Radford was not the kind of a

man to be intimidated. He faced Red with refusal written large on his determined face.

"Say, don't git so worked up, young feller. I ain't a tryin' to boss ye. Only the rest uv the boys knows these hyah rocks like a book. Somebuddy's got to stay hyah in case we run the skunk down. Ye see, this is the only way fur him to git out ef we do a good job up yander. Mebbe ye'll git the job uv wingin' him."

Big Red liked his touchy tenderfoot immensely. He had seen him make good on pure pluck when his knowledge of broncos or steers left much to be desired. He had no intention of giving him an easy job that cast aspersions on his courage, and he was willing to make a pretty long explanation to let Radford know it.

Ted accepted the situation. It was the only thing to do. He was ignorant about the location, and he had had enough experience with the deceptive and devious mountain ways to know he might keep them hunting him all night after they had captured or given up the Double X-ers.

He saw them all disappear as if they had melted into the rocks. He sat down in a black shadow against a big boulder and stretched his ears for the first sound that would indicate sight of the quarry.

The night was silent with that profundity which is as painfully oppressive to the ears as noise. Ted grew restless. There was something disquieting in the strange, big faces that were shaped in the profiles of the jutting rocks. They stared down at him with the stoic attention they had practised for such ages that it made him lonely to think of them.

He rose cautiously, and, taking advantage of the shadows, stole slowly toward that "whitelike rock" which Big Red had indicated as the focus of the hunt. He heard the gurgle of water and knew he must be near the place where the Apache Spring gushed forth to fill its basinlike pool.

The person who put the bitter drug, or whatever had been used to turn the waters to gall, must have placed it at the source of the spring. Nerving himself to it, Ted bent down and tasted the water where it emerged from the rock. It was cold and deliciously pure. He drank eagerly, washing away the puckery feeling that still teased his tongue.

Suddenly the silent world about him burst into chaos of sound. He leaped away from the spring, energized by the shouts that rang down from the heights above him.

Red's voice called to some to stop. There was a wild clatter of loosened stones. Ted dodged back under a shelving rock as they came bounding down on his head.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Red yelled again.

Radford cuddled against the rock. The idea that Red might be behind the individual who was disturbing the rocks and in line with where he had stood a second before made him appreciate the shelter he had gained.

The rocks still showered down, so he knew that the pursued had not obeyed Red's peremptory demand. At any moment Red might fire and a crumpling figure fall down over the shelf of rock.

There was something indescribably trying to Radford as he watched the edge of the rock over him and anticipated the bark of Red's gun and the falling quarry. He could hear the boys shouting and scrambling among the loose stones as they rushed in pursuit of the man they hunted. But Big Red's bellow was what he listened for with the greatest attention.

Then everything was still. They had lost sight of the man. The rocks no longer fell over the edge of the shelf. At the risk of being mistaken for the quarry, Radford started to crawl from his shelter.

But he did not go. Something small and soft and panting in sobs fell against him. It rebounded, and Ted

heard a low cry. In the shadow he could not see, but he knew it was a human being.

But it was not a man. No man ever fell against another with such light impact. Ted reached out and grabbed the intruder; he was as eager as any other Mesquite to lay hands on the one who embittered the spring.

The person relaxed in his grip. He discovered that he held a woman.

"Great guns!" he breathed, so overcome with surprise that he let go.

But the woman gasped and shook and clung to him, as if any human being might offer aid. She was frightened almost to death; Ted knew it.

But, in her terror of Big Red and his gun and men, she forgot the lesser fright of finding him where she had fled for safety and just hung to him with the convulsive, unreasoning grasp of a thoroughly scared child.

Ted felt for her hands. He had a blind instinct to get hold of them and let her feel his strong, calm nerves till her own ceased to jump and twitch. He could feel her body shake with the pounding of her heart.

But his hand closed on something scarcely less astounding than her own advent had been. It was a granite-ware stew-pan.

Somehow the homely object restored Radford's wits. It started his sense of humor working. But it made him cling more securely to the little figure that he held in the circle of his right arm.

There was not a woman on the Silsby ranches. Silsby hated them. He never hired a married man if he could help it, baldly proclaiming that he did not pay wages to fools. If he were forced by circumstances and the needs of his cattle into employing a man with a wife, the man had to agree that if the wife came within forty miles of the ranch he would shoo her off or throw up his job.

Radford had not heard from Bess often. He felt aggrieved at her, and he had acknowledged to himself that something was radically wrong in their attitude toward each other.

So there were two reasons why the fluttering little woman-thing pressed so tight against him filled an emptiness in life of which he had, till the moment of her sudden coming, not been really conscious.

But the stew-pan rather cooled the hot blood that danced through him as the little creature clung to him. Especially it was effective when it dribbled something wet and sticky over his hand.

Suddenly the rain of rocks began again. He pulled the woman back under the shelf.

"Oh! They are coming down the path!" she whispered, clinging closer.

"Sit down!" Radford ordered; and he felt a pleased masculine thrill when she obeyed and sank at his feet.

He stepped from under the shelter. He looked up the trail that seemed to come directly down toward the platform formed by the shelf. Big Red was coming pell-mell down the steep route with the others sliding and running behind him.

"I've got him!" Radford shouted, knowing that he was expected to capture the culprit, and news that he had would make Big Red's threatening gun assume less alarming conspicuousness.

The men gave a whoop of triumph. Ted waited for them to get down with a grin of anticipation. He could almost see the discomfiture of the men when they discovered that the man all seven chased was a woman, and a little one at that.

Big Red stumped down behind the shelving rock first. The others came quickly. He waited till they were all there, peering into the deep shadow beneath the shelf. Then he went to lead forth the quarry.

But it would not come. A variety of slaps and scratches held Radford off for a second. Then he grabbed her bodily and stepped forth.

He felt her small body stiffen in his

arms. Then she slid out of them. She pushed him with all her strength and walked out alone into the moonlight.

Big Red nearly fell over backward when he saw her. In his amazement he dropped his gun and her eyes blazed in the silver shine.

"Why do you dare to run wildly ovaire my estate?" she demanded.

Radford jumped as if he had stepped on a live wire. That quaint French accent had lingered in the background of his mind like a silenced melody just waiting some subtle inspiration to resound.

Curious, excited, and because he could not see her face for the fall of her loosened hair, Radford sidled about till he stood in front of her.

Large and brilliant eyes, smooth cheeks flushed to vivid scarlet, white teeth flashing like jewels between the parted curls of her scornful lips, he beheld a kind of glorification of the pale little girl he had seen at the door of his own room in his Fifth Avenue home.

Two minutes before she had been shaking and sobbing in terror of these men who stared at her as if she were a ghost. Now she was calling them to account with an imperial dauntlessness that had the charm which little women can infuse into their expression of big emotions.

Radford felt his blood leap. He regretted as bitterly as the water of Apache Spring had tasted that he had not made more of his opportunity when she had clung and sobbed in his arms.

He caught his breath. A young, lovely girl seemed, in the man-populated world where he had been lately, the most beautiful thing that God ever made.

"Shall you have the water of my spring?" she questioned, while the men stood about in awkward silence. "I tell you *non!*"

And she did tell it. She said her negative with its French nasal so emphatically that the men felt all the subtle forces, the strength of women which again and again turned their might of will and muscle to nothing.

Big Red made an effort to combat her. He lifted his head and looked at the palpitating, wonderful little figure perched so firmly on a rock.

"We—we got to have water fur the cattle," he managed to say.

"Do your cattle like thees wataire?" she asked, leaning toward him with the slight, sure poise of a bird about to take flight.

"Some darn fool put something in the spring—" he began again.

"I am that darn fool, *monsieur!*" she interrupted, waving the stew-pan belligerently. "But now I am come to be again the darn fool and put more of the bitter in the wataire. You shall not have one drop! Not one, I say! I weel find ways to keep you from eet. For what you have done to my Oncle Phillipe I weel punish you, you cowboys beasts. I am Natalie le Fevre."

The announcement produced a profound impression.

"Did you—wuz it you put somepin in the spring?" Big Red asked.

She nodded, a vindictive little bob of her black head that shook her hair so that the breeze caught long tresses and floated them out like filmy dark wings behind her.

Radford, an observer of the scene, had never seen a woman so breath-takingly alive with radiant energy and life. She looked to him like a creature of the west wind and the silver moonlight. He began to think his head was sun-touched and suspected that the fever was merging into moonlight madness.

"Ees eet not my spring?" she asked with an air of such delightful impertinence that Radford wanted to pick her up and run away with her where he alone, with his mind fired by hers and his heart pounding in a new way, could reap the wealth of her imagination and her charm.

He wanted to kick Red and his practical-minded cow-punchers out of the way. The world was made of silver

moonlight and rosy lovelight; and he wanted to take this girl in his arms and sail off into the enchanted atmosphere of it.

"If you are Frenchy Fill—"

"A-h!"

To the accompaniment of the indignation-charged exclamation the stew-pan described a graceful arc and hit Big Red neatly on the head. A spatter of small bits of something adhered to his face and clothes while the pan trailed a silver bow of liquid through the air.

"Excuse me! I'm done!" the foreman capitulated forcefully. "Silsby kin do his own fightin' fur this hyah water-hole. Wimmin allays wuz too much fur me."

Big Red was grimly picking the particles of bark off of his face. The six cowboys and Radford were manfully gulping down the laughter that nearly dismembered them. Ted could not suppress the appreciative grin with which he looked at the victorious little defender of the spring.

She was staring at him with surprise all over her expressive face. He saw that she had just recognized him. He took off his felt hat and bowed ceremoniously.

"Am I such a leetle girl when I can vanquish these great beasts?" she asked suddenly.

She wanted his good opinion. Ted gloated over the knowledge of that as it came to him. He had felt her voice in him long after he no longer heard it. She had not forgotten him. He never had lacked courage that took advantage of ready-made opportunities. She was bending toward him, smiling, her eyes fastened on his.

He promptly stepped close beside her rock throne. He measured even then a head above her. He looked straight and daringly into the dark eyes.

"You *are* a little girl—a little bitter-sweet girl!"

The next instant a human avalanche struck him in the back and sent him sliding with the loose rocks down toward the bitter waters of Apache Spring.

CHAPTER X.

"WHO WAS NICK BULLEN?"

"THAT's foh youah impudence!"

Radford picked himself up from the edge of the basin and glared into the angry eyes of a young fellow about his own age, a complete stranger. He saw the six cowboys of his own bunch approach threateningly, about to rough-handle his assailant.

"Hold off!" he said with ominous calm. "This is my business."

He saw the measuring glance that his new enemy gave him. He was conscious that the little lady had come from her perch on the rock and was regarding the tense inaction of the group with startled eyes. A threat was in the silent air, and she knew it.

"You know I didn't mean to be impertinent, don't you?" Ted asked coolly, turning from the glowering face of his unknown enemy.

"*Oui, oui, monsieur!*" she exclaimed, anxious to serve in the settlement of the difficulty which had so unexpectedly developed.

"Please tell this—this gentleman in English, so he will understand," Ted instructed.

The little lady was zealously obedient.

"Mr. Sikes, thees gentleman did not mean to be impertinent. Indeed, eet was compliment."

Big Red turned sharply when he heard the name by which she addressed the young man. But Sykes had no interest in anything but Radford and the girl. What she said served to infuriate him still more. He controlled a hot temper with evident difficulty.

"What right's a stranger got to compliment you, Mlle. le Fevre? He'll hev to learn you got a man to look after you an' be more pertic'lar how he shakes his compliments round!" Sykes exclaimed.

Radford read the situation with the quick eyes of an intuitive man and the angry ones of a lover. He guessed why Sykes was so belligerent. He guessed it by the leap of primitive instinct in himself. Sykes loved the girl and wanted to beat and batter any other male being who made a bid for the favor he desired.

Ted felt with him, though not for him. Indeed, his own nature clamored for the removal of the tall, good-looking young Southerner. The mere thought that Sykes might be a successful lover inspired him with such a desire to choke him that Ted leaped at him forthwith.

"I'll settle you!" he announced jubilantly.

"Oh! please — please!" Natalie cried.

The plea worked oppositely from the way she wished. It made each of them think that it might really be a petition for mercy to the other. They went on toward the encounter.

But Natalie was quick in action as in thought. She stepped between them. Radford felt the warmth of her hand through the flannel of his shirt. He paused, wanting at that moment to use his strong right to catch and hold the small left. He anticipated how it would flutter first and then, if he were lucky and tactful, lie quiet in his clasp.

Sykes, too, stopped.

"He's got to apologize to you, Mlle. le Fevre!" Ted heard him growl.

It was another chance. Radford saw it instantly—a fine, big chance to ingratiate himself with the little lady. That his rival made it for him gave it zest. He promptly took the little hand and bent over it with unmistakable courtesy.

"If I seemed, even a little, to presume—" he began, while an emotional scales somewhere in him industriously weighed the chances of his being able to kiss the hand and continue to live in the same territory with the watching and fun-loving cow-punchers.

"On our old acquaintance in New York," Miss Bitter-Sweet prompted as if she wanted him to carry the situation according to his own desire.

He followed her lead, amused and excited by her playing in with him against the gloomy Sykes.

"I fancied I might dare to say something pleasant without being punched by one of your Western friends," he observed, inwardly pleased as Sykes became embarrassed.

But romance and carpet-knighting appealed little to Big Red. His accumulating anger had been focusing on Sykes for some time. It was forced to find an outlet.

"Ain't ye one uv Gill's punchers?" he demanded.

"Whut business is that uv youahs?" Sykes instantly retorted, glad to get a fight with some one to relieve his pent-up feelings.

"I reckon you put this hyah lady up to spoilin' the spring soze our critters cain't water hyah! It's one uv the dirty tricks ye seem to like, ye Double X-ers!" Big Red said, getting louder and louder as he continued.

Before Sykes could reply — and he was not slow at retort either—Mlle. le Fevre swept down on Red.

"I need no one to do what you say 'put me up'!. Thees ees not a dirty treeck! The quassia bark is clean and not harmful — only bittaire. Neither you nor the cattle can drink eet with pleasure."

One who has lived among men on ranches knows that lightning and a cowboy's sense of humor act with equal unexpectedness. These boys burst into a roar. All but Big Red.

"Is this hyah spring a goin' to be open to the critters that belongs to Gill?" he shouted, with the idea that noise would overcome the little lady and his own terrific embarrassment at dealing with a woman.

"The spring ees mine. Nobody has eets wataire unless I say so!" Miss Bitter-Sweet responded quietly.

"Reckon you've bin hangin' 'round

gittin' in some good licks for Gill!" Red observed to Sykes.

"Whut's that to you?" Sykes returned.

"What are the 'good licks' you name?" Natalie asked quickly.

She faced Radford, but he hesitated about an answer. Sykes looked like a very decent chap. His sense of justice would not let him cast aspersions on the attentions he might have paid Mlle. le Fevre.

Indeed, he was so much less a cowman, and so far short of loyalty to "the ranch" than Big Red that he could not think of Sykes being agreeable to the little lady for Gill's sake rather than her own. He found it embarrassing to answer her, but Natalie's eyes persistently demanded a reply.

"I guess Red thinks that Mr. Sykes has tried to make some deal with you for the use of the water by the Double X cattle exclusively," he said.

"M. Sykes does not own the Double X. Eet ees a M. Gill who would make the good licks."

There was something so bewitching about her quick assumption of the slangy phrases and turning them to dainty means of expression that Radford laughed aloud.

"You laugh at me!" she said.

Radford literally broke up the meeting. Negotiations ended, Mlle. le Fevre whirled around and ran up the trail. Sykes followed her without a word to his enemies, the Mesquiters, Natalie paused on the platform above where she had sought shelter and found Ted.

"Eef there is a wish to make the good licks for the Mesquite Ranch, M. Frederick Radford must not come. I weel speak only to the 'boss,' not any small potatoes!"

She flitted off up the trail. The last stinging echoes of her peppery farewell died away. She had used a favorite expression of her Uncle Phillipe with telling force. Ted no longer laughed at her slang; he felt it too deeply.

He remembered how she had resented being taken for a child before. Now he had laughed like an idiot and given her the idea that he was still regarding her as a youngster. He reflected bitterly that he was probably unlucky to have changed his point of view.

She was a woman to him now. He suspected, because his mind and body were filled with a thousand subtle impulses and sensations he had never felt before, that she was the one woman.

This ranch-feud, too, appeared to offer chances for him to get so much farther into her disfavor that he could have groaned aloud. But Big Red's growling rather diverted him from selfish interests.

The foreman was muttering things about Gill and his paper-collar coming over to negotiate with Frenchy Fill-up's niece. Sykes clearly had a stand-in. He railed at Radford for not making the best of his own chances, and Radford meekly accepted the reproaches. They seemed so tame compared with his own.

Big Red intimated that Silsby would not take his own part in fighting for a girl's favor in order to secure the use of the spring. He was not the kind of a man to knuckle to a girl and crawl round to ask her to give his cows a drink.

Suddenly Red's ramblings took more serious form. He was thundering out his belief that Silsby would run Frenchy Fill-up's niece out of the country just as the cow-men had run out Frenchy himself. They could make life seven different kinds of hell for the girl, and she would be glad to hit the trail eastward.

Radford tried to object. If Mlle. le Fevre owned the spring she ought to be allowed to dictate about its use.

"Frenchy let us both, us an' the Double X, use that thar spring," Red said as they rode off toward the ranch.

"Did you pay anything for the privilege?" Ted asked.

"Pay! Frenchy Fill-up never

seemed to know that the spring wuz wuth nothin'. An' it's the only place fur miles whar critters kin be watered. He hed 'bout a' much sense 'bout business as a prairie-dawg. Ef he'd hed any more he'd never a bin traded out uv his share in the mine by Al Watson an' Nick Bullen."

Radford pulled up his pony with a jerk.

"Who?" he asked, scarcely sure he heard aright.

Here, under the sky of velvet blue, lighted by stars that almost sang, so radiant with life and brightness were they, he was hearing of his strange visitor and uninvited house-guest.

"Do you know Nick Bullen?" he questioned again.

"Prospected with him fur four years 'fore I tuk to ranchin'," Red answered. "But I ain't heerd uv him fur fifteen year or more. Bullen an' Silsby ust to be pardners 'fore Gill come out. They camped on all these hyah ranges. Frenchy come strollin' 'long from nowhere in pertic'lar an' goin' to the same place.

"Him an' Al Watson an' Bullen got hold of some minin' claims out yander, an' Frenchy sole out to Bullen fur this hyah pile uv rocks that's got nuthin' but the spring wuth a red. Silsby allays sorter thought he'd oughter hed the spring. Gill wants it. An' the gal's got it! An' they'll be the devil a doin' when Silsby finds out 'bout this hyah!"

Red drew his hand across his forehead as if hard thinking and long talking wore on him. He was worriedly anticipating the many difficulties already a part of his work as foreman increased again and again as the rancor between the ranches broke into open war. That "gal" and the spring would be the storm-center.

"Sykes is a good-looker. He'll jes' 'bout git her to—"

"Oh, no, he won't!" Ted cut in with cold calm.

"'Cause you ain't a wantin' him to git nothin' from her ain't no good sign thet he won't!" Red commented, hitting the nail on the head with a precision that forced Radford into gloomy silence and gloomy fears.

The name he had impulsively given the little lady bade fair to represent too truly what she was destined to be to him — little Miss Bitter-Sweet. Sykes was young and manly looking.

He had come down that trail as if he knew it; come as if he had before found Mlle. le Fevre at the spring, or as if he followed to take care of her. He must be on friendly and visiting terms at the house.

Suddenly Bess, like a tall, beautiful statue, rose in his mind beside the vivid little girl of the Apache Spring. Before he analyzed why his desire went so unerring toward the iridescent woman he was lost in an ecstasy of remembering how she had clung to him and trembled in his arms.

As for Natalie, she was rushing along the trail toward the Stone House, followed by Tom Sykes, to whom she would not speak.

"*Ma tante! Ma tante!* Where are you?" she called.

Miss Thorpe rose and came to the edge of the stone veranda that ran along the front of the house. The next moment Natalie had buried her head on the friendly shoulder and was shaking.

"*Ma tante,* who ees here, do you theenk?" she cried, lifting her face to show the laughter rioting with her eyes and lips and the single dimple in her left cheek. "Eet was too funny! He theenks he ees so old and beeg, and me so leetle! And I have telled heem he may not speak to me, he ees too leetle potato!"

Alice Thorpe spent a good deal of time during the day and night trying to keep in touch and understanding with the flights of fancy in which her little companion engaged. But this was beyond her. She could not imagine to whom Natalie referred.

"Whom do you mean, Natalie?" she asked.

"A-h! the smart young man — M. Frederick Radford of New York Ceety!" Natalie answered. "He ees of the Mesquite Ranch. He come with the beeg red man to find why their cows come home."

Alice Thorpe did not speak. She could not. Her gray eyes were wide with a look of horror that made Tom Sykes wonder fiercely what the handsome puncher he had seen for the first time really meant to these two women. Had he come West to find Natalie?

Natalie looked up at Miss Thorpe. She, too, stared at her. The moonlight streaming down on the roofless veranda revealed her white, startled face so clearly that both of the watchers were silent in sheer surprise.

"Frederick Radford here!" she whispered, as if she could not make herself believe.

If Sykes had needed fuel for the fire of hatred that burned in him, he had it in the realization that Frederick Radford's presence was regarded by the woman, whose care of Natalie he knew to be continual and devoted, as either dangerous or undesirable.

Intuitively, he knew that Natalie's poking fun at the strange puncher was really an indication of her interest in him. He read the meaning of her objection to being treated as a child as an unconscious desire to be taken as a woman by Radford.

She felt toward him with a woman's developed emotion, not the casual impulse of a child. And he saw that Miss Thorpe was deeply opposed to any association between her young charge and the handsome New Yorker.

Warm and intense, Sykes had the gift of championing a cause. He came from a feud family; and his ancestors had lived cheerfully and died happy in the midst of sacrifices and suffering to the thing for which they fought.

He looked at Miss Thorpe, and in a glance which she utterly failed to understand he dedicated himself to the removal of Frederick Radford from the neighborhood of Natalie le Fevre. Jealousy of the man whom he knew to be of another class than his own made him hot-bloodedly eager to begin his work.

Big Red was right to prophesy trouble created by the coming of the little daughter of Eve and niece of Phillipe le Fevre into the ranch country. His big red head would have ached to splitting point if he had tried to analyze the tangled threads that were to weave into a war between the two ranches. And an influence, utterly apart from any he had ever noticed in the country, would have completely baffled him.

"Who is that Radford felleh?" Sykes demanded hotly, while Natalie still looked at Miss Thorpe.

"He is — my friend," she replied, turning to look with cool, level glances into his somber eyes.

"Is he, Miss Thorpe?" Sykes had the indiscretion to ask.

He flushed at his own lack of chivalry; but he waited with desperate concentration for her reply.

"Natalie met him in New York," Alice answered non-committally.

"Ah reckon he come out hyah to see you mebbe," Sykes ventured.

Miss Thorpe turned to the house. It had been such a haven, such a place of peace and quiet. Somehow it seemed to her that its shadows had suddenly acquired sinister and threatening darkness.

"I'm sure he didn't come West—on Natalie's account, Mr. Sykes," she said; and something in her words brought Natalie's to hers with a questioning look that Miss Thorpe would have given much to avoid.

"Why did he come?" Sykes inquired, as if he, too, had detected more significance than she had intended in her words.

"He's very rich. I suppose he thought he would like the experience of roughing it a while."

Tom Sykes's sensitive face flamed with anger and scorn.

"He's one uv them rich gazabos

that wants to be a cowboy, is he? I reckon we'll learn him!"

Completely forgetful of the courtesy which was his usual manner, absorbed in the rage against Radford that was really rooted in jealousy and that borrowed strength from every possible source, he started away from the house which had seemed heaven-like to him since Natalie had come.

There was such concentrated rage in his very steps that Natalie and Miss Thorpe looked after him in alarm. Suddenly Natalie ran after him across the rocky plateau which was the front yard of Phillipe le Fevre's odd house on the butte.

"M. Sykes!" she called softly.

Sykes stopped in the trail that led down to where his horse stood. Then he turned and climbed back to where Natalie waited. He paused just below and looked up at her with his heart in his eyes.

"You go — without *adieu?*" she reproached.

"I'm—I'm so darned jealous!" he acknowledged.

"You—have—not—cause."

Natalie was fighting a woman's battle. She saw deep into the stormy nature of her admirer. She read the thread of his jealousy—to Ted Radford. She hated hereself for fearing it, for concerning herself so desperately with Radford's welfare.

He was a rich young man. He had probably many lovely women friends. She was foolish to care. But she bent, bent all of her soul, all of her charm, the witchery of her voice and eyes, to saving him. She worked with every power she possessed to allay Sykes's jealousy and stimulate his hope.

"You mean that?" Sykes exclaimed, reaching hungry hands for her.

She slipped beyond his grasp as lightly as the starlight fell through the spaces of the night. Out of reach, she laughed down at him. The sound fell like balm on Sykes's ears.

It would have taken a keener man—and a man not in love with her—to hear in the gay sound any more than the girl's pleasure at the plain proof of her power that he had given.

"I know heem only a leetle! I have seen heem once before thees night! You are seelly, M. Sykes! Go home and sleep sound! Then you have more sense and not so much shoot in your head! Go home! Go home! Go home!"

She called the advice to him to a tune as she backed away toward the house. With his hat in his hand, he watched her move lightly to her improvised melody. Then she disappeared into the big room of the house.

He turned again to the trail, mounted, and rode the nine miles to the Double X with a small witch-woman dancing in his brain till he almost saw her before him in the moonshine.

CHAPTER XI.

FRIENDS AT HOME

ALICE THORPE awaited Natalie's return with something like terror. She was bound by a promise to Dr. Stratton never to mention that she had had a patient named Bullen and to do all in her power to suppress any curiosity that might lead to investigation of the death of the man found at the base of the terrace at Cressymere.

Bess had gone to Stratton and told him all that happened on the night and morning of Ted's hasty going. Without telling her what he did, Midge got from her the clue to Radford's actions.

He knew that he was hard up. The snake-skin belt had apparently gone with Bullen when he left the Fifth Avenue house. Stratton believed that the real truth about it was that Radford had taken it, had followed out the generosity which was natural to him, and left the thousand dollars to Natalie and had gone to Cressymere thinking Bullen could not follow.

He had followed; and they had met. Bullen had been found dead in the

pool the next morning; and the snake-skin belt had been discovered in the red lacquer vase at which Radford had looked with interest the day before.

Stratton was not disposed to think that Ted had pushed Bullen over the wall and into the pool. But he did believe, when Bess described the place, that Ted had hastened Bullen's departure in some way; and the man had climbed over the balustrade thinking he was escaping.

It was more with the intention of making his directions to Miss Thorpe binding than for any belief he had that she knew more than she told of her patient that he pointed out to her the possible suspicion that might center on her as the last one known to have been with Bullen. The gift to her little friend might, in the eyes of the suspicious, seem to afford a reason for her wishing Bullen to disappear.

Midge had thoroughly frightened Miss Thorpe. She had a New England spinster's horror of being involved in a scandal. Now she faced the need of thinking up some explanation of her recent conduct which would satisfy the clever mind and blind the keen intuitions of her friend.

She could not come out and tell Natalie that the danger of being suspected as a murderer hung over Ted Radford. It would be a violation of her professional obligations and her friendly fidelity to Dr. Stratton. Yet she could not allow the interest already awakened in Radford to develop into something more.

Bess and Stratton, fighting the interest in each other that grew more and more importunate, bound themselves in a kind of protective pact to defend Radford from suspicion.

To Stratton it seemed that Bess acted from a principle of loyalty to the man she was engaged to marry. His own friendship stretched and strained to assume an equally brave stand. Struggling against themselves, they worked for Ted.

And now Alice Thorpe was fighting for light by which she might see the way to protect Natalie from Radford and still keep her faith with Stratton.

Probably each fighter of a battle believes his the deadliest; but Midge Stratton was being shaken to depths by his that Miss Thorpe scarcely knew existed. Bess Hetherington confused and excited him.

To have her there in his private office, talking to him of her lover, with her dusky eyes heavy from worry and her soft lips trembling now and then, was almost overpowering.

With a forlorn-hope kind of persistence he kept telling himself that she loved Radford and was proving it splendidly by her stanch loyalty under the present circumstances.

"What shall I do about answering his letters?" she asked suddenly.

Midge was half-maddened by being asked to advise on such a matter. He grew excited, angry even.

"If you love him—" he began, then paused because of the look she gave him.

"A girl isn't apt to love a man she can suspect of—of anything!" she said.

"If you really loved him, you wouldn't suspect—"

"Then—I suppose—I don't really love him!" she interrupted wearily.

The listless confession stirred Midge mightily, stirred him so deeply that he mistook the excitement it created for indignation at her deflection when he had given her credit for such lofty loyalty.

"You've discovered it very suddenly!" he exclaimed.

She lifted her slumberous eyes to his, and there was a question in them which she seemed too dispirited to put into words.

"You expected to marry him—"

"Yes, I do," she interrupted.

"Great guns! you're going to marry a man you do not love and whom you suspect of crime!" he exclaimed.

"I thought—if I did see you—you might be some help—comfort or some-

thing!" she cried indignantly, and with the fire of her smoldering eyes suddenly flaming.

The words throbbed through him like drops of molten metal in his blood. With the finer sense which women of her complex and undeveloped nature often possess, she had known him for her mate. She had come to him for help.

As if some infinitely delicate mechanism within him had been reached and set to work for the first time, he looked seeingly into the dusky fire of her eyes, into her very heart.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to advise you," he said finally, making himself suppress the impulses that were at work in him.

He saw her pale throat tremble. Tears quenched the light in her eyes.

"That—helps some!" she said, smiling timidly, but with a radiance no other man had seen in her beautiful face.

"I don't see how," Stratton said, knowing that he must keep talking, and talking nonsense in consequence.

"Neither do I! I *feel* how. There isn't any one to whom I can talk. Ted's your friend. It does me good to—to rest my own mind of the burden by shifting it to some one who—who—"

Her words dwindled. They ended in short gasps. Stratton was so near her, looking straight down into her eyes. He did a strange thing, one of the unexpected, inexcusable things to which none of us ever get used, but which are the real things, after all, the things that count. He took her hands and asked her if that were the only reason she had come to him.

And Bess saw the danger which he for the moment forgot. She displayed that miraculous woman-power which saves more people than the world ever knows and answered lightly when her whole nature stormed to rush to him.

"It makes me so nervous; and I don't dare tell any one at home why I feel so upset, so I thought perhaps you might prescribe."

Dr. Stratton was a student; but he had never learned how to understand women. He felt the shove with which she sent him back to the safe ground of the commonplace; and he took it for a sign that her interest in him was not of a kind with his in her.

But the real significance of the interest they felt in each other was its meaning to Ted Radford. They, his friend and his sweetheart, had agreed to protect him; but the safety they intended was being threatened by their feeling for each other.

Stratton was true blue; but he was a man. Love came to him with the same intensity that characterized him in other things. Bess was a girl who had been trained to make the most of her charms, and now all the impulses of a strong nature were uniting with the trained charms to wrest from the unpromising conditions the happiness she craved.

So, without either of them knowing the depth and the swiftness of the current that was bearing them along, each was fighting love with a different weapon.

Stratton's was his fidelity to the duties of friendship. Bess's was the ambition which had become almost second nature. And Ted Radford was indebted for his freedom from the suspicion that could be centered on him to this man and woman.

"We're all busy taking care of Ted!" Bess sobbed, unable to control herself longer. "You — and I — and Mr. Barrington. I'm sure he suspects; but he wouldn't have his suspicion become known for the sake of his wife. And Ted—he just goes on enjoying himself! It—it ain't fair!"

Stratton started toward her with open arms. She swayed a moment, then braced herself against her own longings. His arms sank to his side with hands clenched, and Bess moved swiftly and silently out of the office.

Natalie le Fevre came back from her talk with Sykes. She stood on the

threshold of the big room and fixed her great eyes on Alice Thorpe.

"Now you weel tell me why you have acted so strangely about M. Radford. I like heem! Tell me what you mean?"

"I — Natalie, he isn't the proper kind of a man for you to know!" Alice responded.

It was a lame, prim, and utterly inadequate explanation for her extreme expression of concern. Alice felt it. But the dauntless spirit of youth, with its scorn for silly prejudice and narrow convention, looked at her from the dark eyes.

"So! Not a propaire man! Dear *ma tante,* you have become foolish! He is strong in his body and hees beeg blue eyes are brave and good. He is cultured and not like these cowboy beasts. You weel let me know thees Tom Sykes, who cannot spik his words well. Ah, *ma tante,* you are wrong thees once! I know eet—here!"

Natalie pressed her little hands where her heart beat high and warm against her breast. She flung a kiss from the tips of her fingers toward poor perplexed Alice and went to her room with her eyes dream-misted.

CHAPTER XII.

A DECLARATION AND A DUEL.

It was four miles out of Radford's way as he went toward his own destination, the Mesquite Ranch, to stop at the Stone House. But neither his pony's feelings nor the fact that he was wasting time influenced him. He just stopped, anyway.

He knew but one trail that led to the place he sought. His horse trotted more rapidly as it approached the Apache Spring. But Ted held the reins hard.

Humanity prompted him to keep the animal from gulping a mouthful of the bitter draft he had tasted. But he smiled at the recollection of the little lady who had used such a woman's wile in order to free herself of the intrusive cattle.

He dismounted and tasted the water gingerly. It was sweet and cold. Flinging the reins over the saddle-horn, he left the pony to luxuriate by the spring.

Then he settled his belt, jerked at his soft collar, and readjusted his wide hat-brim. Up the trail he climbed—to be surprised by the size and taste of the house which Phillipe le Fevre had had built from the native stone.

He had learned the story of the Frenchman, and with it the reason for his niece's vindictiveness toward "cowboys and other beasts." Le Fevre had had aspirations for a life of somewhat elegant leisure, and it was his wish to introduce some degree of refinement and elegance among his friends of the range.

After his house was complete and the furniture imported from the East all settled, he had had a house-warming. It was the beginning and the end of his efforts to educate the cow-men socially. A course dinner had ended with finger-bowls. They were too much for the riotous cowboys. After they had drunk the water in the bowls or douched each other with it, reciprocity suggested that they return the bath Frenchy Phillipe had provided. They lifted him up, bore him down the trail with great rejoicing, and gave him a cold plunge in the waters of Apache Spring.

Nothing like the explosive eloquence with which he called them ill-mannered and underbred hogs, beasts who knew not the ways of men, and other uncomplimentary names had ever delighted the ears of a bunch of cow-men. It was while the Frenchy sputtered forth water and language that some one changed his name, rebaptized him with the new one of Frenchy Fill-up.

Phillipe strode out of the water, across the prairie, to Piñon, and was never heard of again. But his little firebrand of a niece had heard the story too often to allow its significance to

escape her. Her family pride and her love of beauty and elegance were both insulted by it, and Radford could understand that she was a bewitching but avenging goddess come to punish her uncle's persecutors.

The loss of his estate had meant more to little Natalie than Uncle Phillipe ever guessed. From her French convent she had sailed to America, believing that she was to be reinstated in the same luxurious environment she had known as a child in her father's home. She was orphaned and dependent on Uncle Phillipe, and he met her at the dock and took her to a cheap New York lodging-house.

Within a few days she had seen she must turn her pretty convent arts to bread-and-butter service. She had made ribbon flowers and fed Uncle Phillipe while her own soul starved. Alice Thorpe had met her in a hospital.

Then they had taken a small flat together, where Uncle Phillipe became a permanent visitor, forever reciting his wrongs and telling of the wonderful house and estate from which he had been driven. Uncle Phillipe opportunely died before he quite wore his little niece out.

Radford went toward the Stone House with mingled feelings and his common sense quarreling. He had no business putting himself within the electrically stimulating influence of Miss Bitter Sweet. His mother's letters raged at his absence. She complained that Bess was visiting her pique at him on her, and was only as attentive to her as Mrs. Hetherington forced her to be.

Ted knew that his letters to Bess were far from loverlike. He had hinted repeatedly at his wish to stay in the West, hoping that she would be impelled to object and to release him from the engagement.

As time went on and she wrote friendly notes, but did not offer to break off, he became convinced that she would insist upon the consummation of their plans, even if he wrote her exactly how he was situated.

But all of his disturbing thoughts slid out of his mind as he approached the door of the Stone House. A mere door became a wonderful thing. Behind its inexpressive wood it imprisoned a creature with the power to create his heaven. He knocked and held his breath. She might not be at home.

"O-h!"

Round-eyed and round-mouthed, a vivid little face looked out through the crack at him.

"Isn't this your day at home?" he asked.

Her eyes shone and the dimple was on duty. Ted looked as eager as he felt to be inside the door. He forgot Bess as if she never had been.

"*Ma tante* is not here," she explained shyly.

"Then I'll have to come again—if I may," he said, appreciating her deference to conventions, but disgusted with conventions in general.

"*Ma tante* weel return soon," was the suggestive little sentence that came through the crack.

Radford turned quickly. The door was shut in his face.

"I'll wait at the spring!" he called with restored courage.

He went back down the trail. He waited—an hour. It seemed a year. Then he started in on the second hour and tried to convince himself it was a minute, for the low-dropping sun reproved him.

A slight sound reached him. He stiffened to attention, but carefully kept from looking round.

"I weesh to show you something," she said in most businesslike tones.

She had debated about coming. Miss Thorpe had insinuated and scolded and begged to some effect—while the rich young adventurer was not in the neighborhood. Now she held out a little tin-type which she had seized as an excuse for her coming.

Radford leaped up at her first word.

He hurried toward her. She thrust the picture out before her and stood blushing and fidgeting under his gaze.

"Look at the peecture!" she scolded when he kept his eyes on her.

"All right," Radford consented as he turned his attention to the souvenir of "Oncle Phillipe" which she held. "Why, that's—"

"A-h! You see! Eet ees my benefactor an' your friend!" she exclaimed, excitedly clapping her hands. "Thees ees my Oncle Phillipe! Thees I do not know."

"It's Nick Bullen!" Ted exclaimed, staring at the picture of his strange guest.

"Yes, he who gave me the money to come to thees glorious land of sky and rocks, where I get strong. Am I not fat?" she cried, pirouetting before his enraptured eyes that he might see how changed she was.

"You're—fine!" Ted began enthusiastically and concluded lamely. "Nick Bullen sent you out here to claim your uncle's estate?"

"You laugh at me again?" she questioned, peering intently into his eyes.

"Eet ees not much an estate. That I know. But eet ees health-giving, and I breathe large and happy here!"

To Radford she looked more like some radiant creature about to drift gaily off in the golden air above the butte than a human girl. He forced himself back to the picture as a theme for talk, lest he do some one of the dozen things that tortured him mentally with their promise of joy if he had the courage.

"I hope Bullen recovered. I wrote Dr. Stratton about him just yesterday. I'm afraid I was rather careless about him," he said, then added: "Has Miss Thorpe heard how he is?"

"She hears from Dr. Stratton, but nothing concerning M. Bullen," Natalie replied, showing with what faithfulness Alice Thorpe was keeping her own counsel.

She reached and turned the picture over in Ted's hand. He read three names on the back of it, scrawled on the fading reddish paper.

"'Nick Bullen, Phillipe le Fevre, Al Watson. The Three Dis-graces.'"

Natalie laughed at the ancient joke, and he joined her. It seemed as young and delightful as themselves.

"Does Miss Thorpe leave you here alone?" Radford asked suddenly and with a lover's jealous concern.

"Only thees once," Natalie assured him, blushing at the meanings behind his simple words. "She has gone to the Double X Ranch to talk to M. Geel about the water rights."

"For the Apache Spring?" Ted asked, quickly on guard for the interests of the Mesquite. "You can't sell them the right and leave the Mesquite out!"

"I have not had overtures from the Mesquite Ranch," she replied with dignity.

"Well, you'll get them! Don't do anything, please, till I can tell Silsby you are going to sell. There'll be a regular civil war if you do. The boys won't stand it to have the Double X-ers enjoy the privileges of the water alone. It isn't fair, anyway, Mlle. le Fevre."

Radford's loyalty to his ranch flamed up, hot and strong. But it met an answer that puzzled him.

"Why should you care for the Mesquite Ranch—or anything of us out here?" she asked quickly.

Ted looked at her, perplexed. She identified herself with the country; but she seemed to regard him as a stranger to it and its interests.

"Why shouldn't I care? When a fellow earns his salt from a certain source it's as little as he can do to be loyal to the—"

Mlle. Natalie laughed a little French laugh, in which all her cynical ancestors must have had a part.

"Your salt? Eet ees too funny! You but seek amusement out here! You make a new toy out of thees wonderful country! *Ma tante* says it."

"I just don't!" Ted immediately contradicted. "*Ma tante* has another 'say' coming! I'm making a business of ranching. I'm here to stay and to grow up with the country. I haven't a red cent in the world except the tenner in my jeans and this month's wages—which I won't get till Saturday."

He pulled the lonesome bill from his pocket as if to prove his words. But Natalie merely stared her unbelief.

"It's the confounded truth!" he insisted. "That's why I pulled out of New York. I was dead broke, and I didn't want to sponge on any one!"

"You mean—you are not—a reech young man?" she asked.

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Then you weel stay out here and be a ranchman!" she cried, as if it were delightful news.

"You bet I'll stay! And I'm going to—do you believe in love at first sight?"

He was very close to her—so near that he looked right down upon the top of her smooth, dark head.

"But you deed not like me—at first sight! You theenk me but a leetle ugly child!"

Radford seized her. Such intuition made it impossible for him to keep from taking the vivid little lady, grown up now to loving, with her eyes like wonder-stars and her tender lips pouting and laughing, bewildering, rosy, trembling.

"The time you hit me with the pot was really the first time," he whispered, bending, dizzy as the warmth of her breath fanned his lips.

"Eet was a stew-pan!" she corrected, drawing away.

But Radford caught her, held her, kissed her.

"Natalie!"

The gates of bliss slammed deafeningly in their flushed faces. Radford turned. Natalie withered with embarrassment. On the trail above them Miss Thorpe stood, and Tom Sykes glared down over her shoulder at them.

Instantly Radford reached for the quivering hand of his companion. He drew her close to him and looked up at Miss Thorpe with triumph and joy blazing in his blue eyes.

"Miss Thorpe, I've been telling Natalie that I love her."

The announcement brought no response. Natalie's eyes, lifted with tender pleading in their depths, did not move Miss Thorpe. She gazed down in disapproving silence, while Sykes continued to glare.

"I'm going to ask her to marry me when I can afford—"

"Mr. Radford, there are other reasons besides your engagement to Miss Hetherington that ought to make you ashamed of yourself!"

Radford turned to Natalie. He saw the red leave her cheeks and the black eyes gaze out of a white face that scared him. He knew he deserved the scorn Miss Thorpe was pouring down on him.

"Natalie! I—"

"You are—engage—to some one?" she asked, as if a tight hand at her throat made it almost impossible for her to speak.

"Yes; but we don't love each other—it's one of those affairs that—that—"

"You scoundrel!"

It was Sykes who shouted the words. He came leaping over the rocks to the edge of the basin. Radford turned and faced him. He felt the devilish ingenuity with which fate had wound him up in a tangle which words seemed inadequate to unravel. He confronted Sykes with fists and eyes that ached to oppose something of all that was dead against him.

The young Southerner was fairly consuming with the jealousy he felt and the belief that Radford was an underhanded sneak who had taken the chance of Miss Thorpe's absence to make love to one girl when he was engaged to another.

"Put up your gun!" Ted shouted, seeing the uselessness of the weapons

he had proposed to use, and knowing that a move of his hand to his own pistol would probably end him.

"Not on your life, you skunk!" Sykes replied, coming close and keeping his vigilant eye fastened on Ted's. "Hands up!"

Radford could only obey. Pride smarting and anger raging he had to stick his useless fists up into the air and await the pleasure of Sykes, while Miss Thorpe stood grimly watching and Natalie leaned against the rock with her head bowed, suffering tortures of shame and indignation.

"Now, you kin apologize to Mlle. le Fevre," Sykes suggested, growing cooler and cooler as the situation came more completely into his control.

"I certainly did not mean to—" Ted began, ready to defy the gun and spring at the young man's throat, but forcing himself to be calm because he wanted to make Natalie understand that he had spoken in overwhelming and forgetful impulsiveness which took account only of her and the love that swayed his whole being.

"None uv that!" Sykes warned. "I said 'apologize,' not crawfish, you snivelin' coward!"

Natalie saw the quiver that passed over him. It was a part with the awful wrench that tore him as Sykes heape don his insults and held his victim powerless with his gun. The sweat poured from Radford's body, and he felt cold inside.

"It's easy to call a man a coward when his gun's in his belt!" Ted sneered, getting to a point where he was careless of consequences.

"Take youah'n!" Sykes ordered, his face flushed darkly at the aspersion on his courage.

He lowered his gun while Radford acted on the permission. Instantly the two lifted their weapons. They fastened wary eyes on each other. It was a matter of life and death. Both men knew it; and they looked into each other's faces with the measuring calm of desperate intention.

"One!" Sykes said, still with his imperturable self-possession.

"Two!" he counted on.

Ted knew that "three" meant fire. He wondered if the man who counted had not a ghost of a chance greater than the other. He saw Sykes open his lips to speak the last count.

Suddenly, chaos like that which must have tossed up the great butte seemed to roar and rock about Radford. The gun dropped from his hand and he fell weakly to his knees. Everything was dark.

The instant that Sykes had counted a little figure had appeared between the two men. One shot rang out.

Radford felt something tearing fiercely at the front of his shirt. He heard wild, unarticulated cries such as a mother-beast might make over an injured young one. He felt a small hand, hot and trembling, on the bare flesh just over his heart.

He breathed deeply and tried to sit up. Natalie was beside him. Miss Thorpe was near, and Sykes still stood in his place. But all three were as white as death.

"You're not hurt?" he whispered, trying to press the hand that was being hastily withdrawn from his breast.

"You — you are not hurt?" she asked quickly.

The three watched him as he felt himself and tried his legs, then struggled to his feet and leaned against a rock. He met Sykes's eyes.

"You didn't fire," the Southerner accused.

He was raging inwardly at his position; he had shot at a man who had reserved his fire. But he was wrong in believing Ted had considered him.

"I don't know. I hope not," Ted replied, still slightly dazed. "I saw her coming from behind you just as you started to say three. I heard the gun go off. I thought—good God! I thought we'd killed you!"

He turned to Natalie with every drop of red blood gone from his face. His blue eyes blazed weirdly at her.

Natalie was finding herself. She had endured tortures new and strange; and her pride rose and rebelled against the position in which the two men had placed her. She was humiliated beyond expression by the way she had torn at Ted's shirt and moaned over him in her agony.

She hated herself for the confession in acts that she was so deeply interested in the man who had insulted her. She hated both men for quarreling about her. She wanted to be alone. She wanted never to see either of them again.

"Go! Both of you! I hate you! Eet ees like boys you act! I weel nevaire have you here again! Go! At once! Eet ees what I say!"

She stamped her little foot. Her eyes shot brown fire. Sykes pushed his pistol into his belt and turned toward the trail. Radford drew himself up and looked into angry eyes of Miss Bitter-Sweet with defiance.

It made her more indignant.

"How dare you stay!" she cried, looking at him with straight, cold gaze. "Ees eet not enough that you force me to risk my life because of you? After you insult me with your love-making! A-h!"

Words failed her. The single exclamation came from her lips freighted with such indignation and scorn that Radford lost his courage.

"Say, you hike ef she wants you to!"

Sykes turned in the trail. He glowered down at Radford as if he wanted nothing so much as a chance to get close and half kill him.

"You shut up!" Radford flung at him.

"I'll shut you up or eat my hat!" Sykes responded, resuming his way toward the Stone House.

It needed no translation for the listeners to understand that Ted Radford would need to watch lest Tom Sykes get the satisfaction of laying him out in the dust under the great blue canopy of the sky.

"You weel nevaire come here again!" Natalie told him as she, too, moved away.

"Natalie!" he protested desperately.

But without a glance toward him she seized Miss Thorpe's hand and hurried off up the trail.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STAMPEDE.

WHEN Radford reached the Mesquite Ranch he was amazed to see the tableland on which the ranch-house stood covered with cattle. Despondent as he was, his curiosity waked. He trotted toward the corral and heard Big Red shouting orders to a bunch of new herders, at least new men to him.

"What's the rumpus?" he asked as he approached the foreman.

"Critters got sick. Silsby brought 'em back soze he kin look after 'em.' Goin' to put 'em on the lower range," Red answered.

Radford whistled.

"Say it!" Red suggested crossly.

"Apache Spring's where they'll water, ain't it?" Ted asked, falling into the vernacular.

"Yep."

"Gill's bought the right to use it, I guess," Ted informed Red.

Red turned to him with a ripping oath.

"That pair uv heifers sold to him?" he demanded.

"Looks that way. Miss Thorpe went over to the Double X Ranch, and she came back with that Sykes gink!" Radford explained. "I guess Silsby will have to come down with some cash—"

"What's that?"

Radford turned quickly. The gruff voice came from a man perched on the top board of the corral fence where he seemed to be overlooking the horses inside. Even while he spoke he had begun to descend with an agility that was noticeable.

"Tell him. It's Silsby," Red said, nodding toward the stranger.

It was the first time Ted had seen his employer. In spite of his lack of height he produced the impression of being a combination of iron strength of body and will.

"Whut hev I got to pay fur?" he asked.

Radford explained. The face of the owner of the Mesquite darkened steadily as he learned of the developments since he had gone. It was evidently a bitter pill for him that the Double X bade fair to acquire the rights to the Apache Spring. He listened, growing more and more grim. As Ted finished he opened his mouth and spoke characteristically.

"Hell!" he growled, and turned on his heel.

At dawn the next morning the herders were routed out and the bunch of cattle that had moved restlessly about the ranch-house all night was started eastward. Radford was ordered to go along.

Silsby meant to take by might what he was refused by right. Radford caught a glimpse of him as he galloped ahead, and he concluded that the owner of the Mesquite was looking forward to a fight in order to work off what ailed him.

Big Red joined Ted when the herd was under way.

"Silsby says he ain't a goin' to let two confounded skirts say whut he kin do an' whut he cain't. He's hed the use uv that thar spring sence Nick Bullen loaded the rock-ranch off on Frenchy Fill-up. He ain't a goin' to let the Double X take the hull shootin'-match!"

"Same time, Mlle. le Fevre ought to be paid for—"

"She's too all-fired smart to suit Silsby. She might 'a' giv' him a chanct like she done Gill. Gill ain't got no critters down round yander now; an' when he drives 'em in he'll hev to settle with us some, I reckon."

It worried Ted to think that Natalie was becoming involved in this war between the two ranches. Already the Double X-ers had been doing what mischief they could to wandering bunches of cattle by running them on their own ranges and losing them among their big herds.

Silsby was mad enough to fight at the drop of the hat. Natalie should have extended the privilege equally to both men; and she was pretty certain to come off badly between the two of them.

The cattle were an irritating bunch. Used to the freedom of the big ranges, unaccustomed to much direction from their herders, they resented being driven in a straight line to a given point. They proclaimed their independence by darting away into the arroyos.

The cowboys went after them, sweating and swearing. The day was a long and exhausting chase after the beasts till Radford came to hate the whole layout, men, and animals.

It did not add to his peace of mind to dwell on the fact that he was being returned at once to the place from which he had just been outlawed.

He became more and more disheartened and wretched as he reflected on the position in which he stood toward the girl who stirred him to depths that would not quiet even at the command of his will.

He knew perfectly that utter misery would be his companion till he had found a way to see Natalie and explain himself and his actions.

He had made up his mind on his way back to the ranch to write at once to Bess. With a knowledge of what real love was, he felt the outrage and indignity that they both offered their better natures if they continued the engagement to marriage.

He did not believe himself obliged to sacrifice himself to the mercenary ambitions of Mrs. Hetherington. He suspected that Bess would not break her heart about him. He honestly hoped that she had or would soon find

some one who would reveal life and its possibilities to her as Natalie had illuminated it for him.

But Silsby and the question of the Apache Spring were not the kind of affairs which a hired puncher could defer for social correspondence. The letter had not been written.

It was late in the afternoon of the day following when a buckboard came smartly across the plain at the foot of the butte. Natalie and Miss Thorpe had been into Piñon.

Alice had told Natalie all she knew about Ted Radford. Natalie knew that the chance word of any one of four people might cause Radford to be called to account for his connection with or knowledge of the death of Nick Bullen.

Though she listened quietly to Miss Thorpe's explanation of her aversion for Radford, Natalie made a woman's reservation. She did not believe in the guilt of the man she loved. But her heart throbbed hotly at his making love to her when he was bound to another woman. Jealousy took possession of her.

She pictured the beauty and elegance of the society girl to whom Ted was engaged. She suspected that he had exercised the self-acquired right of many rich and handsome young men to seek love wherever it might seem desirable.

She knew positively that he was poor. He had told her so. But before she could accept that as the motive for his doing away with Bullen, she had asked herself if that were really true, or whether he had merely told her so to carry out the idea that he meant to be a part of the West and continue near her. Had he done it just to win her?

Alice Thorpe's hatred of Radford for daring to insult the girl she loved so devotedly was a pale and lack-luster flame compared with the cruel fire of Natalie's hurt pride. Her intense nature had opened with the sudden, vivid blooming of a cactus-flower, and Radford was the sun that made it blossom. Now that same sun threatened to wither her.

Natalie pulled up the ponies with a jerk. The ground between her and the butte was covered with resting steers. Silsby's bunch had arrived and taken possession. She saw the cattle going toward a point where the butte thrust out and concealed the Apache Spring.

"A-h!" she exclaimed, her little exclamation charged with the variety of meanings she could infuse through it. "M. Gill ees too queeck! He has already sent hees cattle to dreenk from the Apache Spring before we have come to the terms!"

Alice Thorpe, too, was looking in indignant wonder at the cattle. Gill had refused the terms they offered, so that the settlement had been deferred.

As a matter of fact, he had no cattle ready for that range, and he thought delay might lower the price they asked for the water-right. Sykes had assured him that the two women would not deal with the Mesquite Ranch so long as Frederick Radford was there.

"There ees a man. We weel go and tell heem—"

A cowboy had ridden out of an arroyo near them. It was Ted Radford.

Natalie paused as she saw him. Then she struck her ponies and they flew forward. Impelled by his characteristic courage and his refusal to be snubbed meekly, Ted started in pursuit.

But it was too plain that his very presence in the same territory was an abomination. He gave it up and watched the ponies strike the dust from their flying feet as they put distance between him and Natalie.

"The little one's Frenchy's niece, ain't she?" Silsby's gruff voice asked as Radford galloped toward the spring.

He nodded. Without further comment Silsby called to him and sent him to drive up some steers not yet acquainted with the charm of the Apache waters. Radford rounded generously behind the shy steers and came gradually up to them. But they dashed and

turned; and he spent the next twenty minutes in a chase that finally sent them toward the spring.

He was riding slowly along in their trail, breathing his tired horse, when all at once the cattle stopped short in their tracks. His pony, too, stopped. He almost shot over its head as it plowed its fore feet into the ground and stood, snorting and snuffing.

Before Radford could collect his wits to meet the newest phase of the changeful life of the range, his horse whirled under him and began a mad race straight back along the way that the steers had come toward the spring.

Behind him there rose a hideous bellowing. In another second he detected the sound of plunging hoofs. He turned to look back over his shoulder.

Never as long as he lived would he forget the spectacle. The cattle had stampeded. They were wild. Something had happened to frighten them. Used as they were to the far-away ranges, the quick action of some cowboy or the erratic behavior of a sagebush and its shadow might have thrown the first one to approach the strange watering place into a panic from which the whole herd took fright. The leaders of the bunch he had driven up to drink must just have reached the spring when the stampede began.

Wild-eyed, with heads tossing till their horns looked like a thicket of giant ferns against the sky, the steers swept in his track as if he were the object of their mad pursuit. The horse under him acted as if devil-possessed. By its complete loss of the sense it ordinarily displayed, Ted knew the danger that threatened him.

He was no wiser than his mount. Plunging his spurs into the crazy animal's sides, he leaned forward over the laboring shoulders. It was a race with death.

The steers thundered behind him, gaining on him with such amazing speed that he could scarcely believe his own ears. He felt the heat from them, and felt, too, the energy go from his pony's stride. The fear of the unknown gripped him.

The hard work that comes to a cow-pony at times of moving a great herd or rounding up for branding had worn his horse out. Radford tried to shout and coax it to a faster gait. But it was doing its utmost, terrified on its own account into an activity it never could have accomplished under another spur. The pound of the grinding hoofs came nearer.

All the tales Radford had heard about the camp-fire of the horrors of a stampede came to him now. Desperately he urged his horse and listened to the death-drumming behind him.

Suddenly he saw before him the sharp break of an arroyo. It was too late to help his horse to leap the gully. Down the pony went, squatting and sliding till he reached the bottom.

Ted, frantic with the certainty of being ground to pulp under the hard hoofs which would come plunging down, the front steers utterly unable to hold back if they would because of the crowding, fear-wild creatures behind them, dug his spurs into his horse and howled encouragement in the voice of a lunatic.

Scrambling to its feet, the pony leaped off along the course of the arroyo. Accident had done for Ted what he had not the foresight or thought to do himself. It had turned him at right-angles with the steers' course.

But it was too late. The bunch of cattle was too near. Every instant he expected to see the first dark bulk on the edge of the bank above him. His pony rushed on with a speed that nothing but the fear of destruction could have gotten from him.

Then Radford heard unearthly sounds. He turned faint and sick, and, regardless of consequences, he turned in his saddle to look at the death about to strike him.

The movement was too much for the overtaxed pony. He stumbled and went down. Radford lay with his face buried in his arms, expecting death.

It was several seconds before he realized that the thundering hoofs still pounded their death-monody, but not near him. He lifted his head. His pony lay beside him, panting. Back along the arroyo he saw a strange sight.

A man stood on the high bank—the cattle bellowed and struggled in the crevice. It was Big Red. Radford saw him seize the horns of one of the steers and pull with all his mighty strength.

With the curious obedience that wild creatures show to man when they recognize that their brute strength is futile, the steer did its best to respond. Ted saw him plunge and writhe, and finally climb, dripping with sweat and blood, from among his fellows.

Heedless of a sharp pain that darted through his leg as he sprang up, Radford ran back till he came to a break in the bank where he could climb to the level ground above. Big Red had seized another steer by the horns and was tugging and swearing when Ted reached him. He laid hold, and together they released a second animal from the horrible mass.

Ted worked like mad. The groaning of the mangled cattle goaded him. He could see hoofs crush through the ribs of cattle underneath. Horns tangled and gored. Groans like no other sounds he had ever heard rose from the steers, crushed and smothering under their kind.

They pulled as many as they could reach from the arroyo. Radford saw Big Red slide down into the gully. He followed him, and together they worked to coax and pull and drive the steers that could walk either way along the trench.

Covered with blood from the wounded animals, Ted stared at his companion. Big Red was a horror to see.

"Where are the other fellows?" Ted demanded, indignant at the cowboys who had left them to struggle with the awful situation alone.

Red had pulled his guns from his belt. Five of the steers, too much hurt to move, lay groaning on the ground. Five shots sounded and the groaning ceased.

"What did it?" Ted asked as they climbed back to the level.

"Dunno."

Big Red was beyond swearing. Those dead steers and their terror-weak fellows, moving off slowly along the bottom of the arroyo, filled him with a wrath that stifled words. He stumped grimly along the torn ground that marked the flight of the cattle.

Radford whistled to his horse. It had climbed from the crevice in a spasmodic effort inspired by the fear of the cattle coming toward it. It came to him now, dripping with sweat and uncertain on its legs.

Radford hung on to the saddle-horn and eased his aching leg for the walk to the spring where Big Red was proceeding to find out why Silsby and the boys had let the cattle go to destruction. He stopped and stared as he found Big Red was staring, open-mouthed.

Above a lake of fire, leaping red flames, stood Natalie le Fevre. In her firm little hand she held a pistol. She was talking.

It was almost unbelievable. Red and Radford looked at each other and then back at that lake of yellow tongues dancing like devils while the young French girl stood on the rock above like the spirit of the conflagration.

Silsby and the cowboys were ranged below her, looking up. It was a most amazing spectacle; and the two observers hurried forward eagerly.

"The little she-devil! She does it somehow!" Big Red exclaimed.

Ted gazed at the slim figure. He saw the big luminous eyes set in a face so white it looked like a snow-mask. But he could not believe that she had been the one to send the cattle on their fearful death-race, and incidentally to almost end things for him.

His leg was throbbing with fierce pain. But his mind was clear—so clear that it never for a moment after Big Red spoke was clouded with a doubt of

her. She simply could not have done a thing indescribably cruel and repulsive. No, indeed—not little Miss Bitter-Sweet!

Yet there she stood, white and calm, apparently defending her spring. And, where the clear, cold water had been, the hot and seething flash of the fire spat viciously at the cow-men.

CHAPTER XIV.

SILSBY WANTS A TRUCE.

"YE'VE kilt five critters!" Big Red shouted at Natalie as he sprang over the rocks toward the group of cowboys.

Radford saw the look of surprise which flashed at Red; but the dark eyes instantly returned to their chief interest. Her pistol was aimed at Silsby.

A breeze blew across the basin, fanning the flames. Radford caught the smell of oil. It explained the miracle of the burning spring. Oil had been poured on the water and fired.

Ted recalled the quassia. But this was tragically different. A malignant and ingenious cruelty was back of this effort to keep the cattle from the spring.

It was easy to imagine how the thirsty herd had crowded about the basin, pushing and shoving to get at the cool, fresh water. Then the torch had been held to the surface and the fire had blazed up in the very eyes of the beasts.

It explained their mad rush. It accounted for the way they shoved each other into the ravine till a bridge was made of their own bodies, and the sharp hoofs of the ones behind ground across the others in the race toward safety.

Prairie and forest fires pursued the creatures they sought to kill; and these dumb brutes had responded to the instinct of self-preservation. They fled before the blaze they feared.

And Natalie! Natalie le Fevre, the girl he loved so that looking at her with the doubt growing in him was torture, could she have done this fiendish thing?

"You've got to believe me an' the boys!" Silsby shouted in rage.

"I would not believe you before the throne of God, you lying man!" Natalie replied to Radford's mystification.

"I tell you—" Silsby yelled, growing more excited.

"Eet ees enough! I leestin to you no more. You and all your cowboy beasts, go! Now!" she commanded like some small goddess of wrath and justice.

Her look and manner were completely different from the way Radford imagined a girl would appear who had been found guilty of an atrocity. He turned to the cowboys.

With fixed, angry eyes they glared at her. But no one made a move to go or to attack her. Radford felt that they were suppressing emotions which might break loose at a word. He really could not understand why they remained in check.

"Must I shoot?" she cried when they stood firm. "Thees ees my spring. You go when I say!"

Silsby turned to Radford with a beaten look that sat queerly on his stern and capable face. But Red had accumulated a store of rage that knew no such word as peace. A volcano of words burst from him.

"Say, you gal, you stop yer confounded nonsense or I'll blow the top uv yer head off!" he yelled, as if every ounce of control he ever possessed had changed and gone to swell his wrath. "Ye've killed five uv our critters, dern ye! I dunno how many's hurt soze they'll die. Ye ain't no woman! Ye're a confounded, all-fired she-devil; an' the surest way fur ye to keep whut fool head ye got is to—git!"

Big Red's gun was out. He leveled it, straight as a die and sure to kill if he shot, at the girl poised high on the rock. She did not flinch.

The men were actually stone stiff. No one believed that Red would be borne on the crazy height of his rage to the point of actually aiming at her. But he was; and in that instant every man among them was turned to a creature of paralyzed wonder.

The next second and because the gun had not barked its awful intention, the cow-men thrilled. For the girl never quivered. She knew, and they knew she knew, that Red was mad, that he was shooting-crazy.

Radford got his breath. He sprang forward and seized the barrel of Red's gun. The foreman swore at him and struggled; but Ted hung on and pressed himself against the pistol so that a shot at Natalie would have gone through his body first.

"Natalie, you didn't mean to kill those steers, did you?" Radford shouted.

For a second her white lids fell over the black fever of her eyes. She turned even whiter. Ted read the sick horror that went through her at his question. It relit his faith in her.

"Look here! Cut this, Red!" he said, jamming Red's gun down at his side. "She didn't do it! I'll stake my life on it."

"Oh, ye ninny! Ye're crazy in love! Whut do ye know 'bout it?" Red growled.

"Natalie, tell them you didn't set fire to the spring to stampede—"

"Whut's got ye?" Silsby cut in. "She's accusin' me of tryin' to spile the water, ye eejit!"

Radford loosened his hold on Red's gun. It was no longer needed. For the foreman was looking with fixed, perplexed gaze at the ranch-owner.

"Whut's that?" Red asked. "I guess we're on the wrong trail."

In growing surprise Radford and Red listened as Silsby explained that Natalie had suddenly appeared as the spring burst into flame and the cattle stampeded, and had accused him of what it seemed that she must have done.

It was a strange situation. Natalie had taken for granted that the cattle were Gill's and had come at once to investigate. The basin had burst into flame at her feet.

The men had had all they could do to escape when the cattle turned wildly. She had been seen by them, like an angry spirit above the burning pool, and she and they had jumped at the natural conclusions.

Prompted by an impulse that disregarded her personal feelings toward him, Radford climbed the rock and stood beside her.

"Mlle. le Fevre, something's wrong here—some misunderstanding. Somebody certainly poured the oil on the water. Five of our cattle are dead out yonder. Any number are hurt. I was almost killed in their stampede. There's an explanation due from some one. I'm dead certain you didn't put the oil there and set it blazing; or, if you did, you had no idea of what it might—"

"I am not cruel—or deeshonorable!" Natalie interrupted, with a peculiar scorn which Ted did not understand.

"Do you know who did this devilish thing?" he persisted, knowing that she must vindicate herself before the men or pay cruelly for it later.

"I do not," she answered positively and with impressive truthfulness. "M. Radford, I am so bad a shot that eet ees most dangerous for any of the Mesquite men to remain on my land. I do not know which one I shoot—but eet weel be some one! I shall shoot!"

Radford paid no attention to her threat. He turned to the cowboys.

"Look here, boys, she didn't do this trick. We know we didn't. Then—who did?" he asked.

Radford had expected a variety of answers, guesses probably. He wanted the blame shifted from Natalie at any cost. He was amazed when the reply came like a war-cry from the cow-men.

"The Double X-ers!"

As if the thought came to the men at the same moment, they turned toward the rocks on the far side of the basin. The flames had started there. They were dying slowly on the side nearest them.

Instantly, with guns in hand and long, wary steps, the cowboys strode grimly around the pool and started into the defiles and crevices above where the fire had been ignited.

At the same moment Radford turned to Natalie. He said just one word.

"Sykes?"

Natalie lifted eyes that clearly revealed the surprise and horror with which the thought of the Southerner's culpability came to her.

"I do not know," she replied.

"Have you seen him to-day?" he questioned, wondering if she were protecting Sykes.

"No. We have been away—to Piñon."

"He might have thought he was helping you. And putting one over on the Mesquite Ranch at the same time!" Radford said grimly.

The memory of the mangled cattle, the pain of his strained leg, and a sudden inability to do more than stare helplessly into Natalie's white face came over Ted all at the same time. He turned away when she did not speak.

The men were moving like silent shadows among the rocks. The very stillness they maintained made the settling dusk seem threatening. At any moment they might capture Sykes or some one who would appear to them as the source of the disaster to the Mesquite cattle.

"You'd better go to the house," he suggested, dreading what might happen shortly, for cattlemen made short work of those who maltreated their beasts.

"I do not care for the society of *monsieur*, so weel take hees advice," she said quickly.

"Natalie! If you knew how I love you—" Ted exclaimed, the protest wrung from him by the intensity of his desire to keep her.

"I have the mind to comprehend—that kind of love!" she exclaimed, moving in front of him to reach the trail.

Regardless of the pain in his leg, he leaped after her. He seized her in his arms. He pressed his lips hard against her black hair.

"It doesn't make any difference how you treat me! It doesn't make any difference if you hate me now! You're going to love me! I'm going to have you! You're mine!" he exclaimed.

A shout rang out among the rocks.

"They've got him!" Radford cried, with such horror in his face that Natalie stopped her futile efforts to break from his convulsive clasp.

"What — weel — they do?" she whispered.

"Lord only knows!" Ted answered, then listened for another outburst.

It came. Simultaneously he and Natalie turned and climbed the trail. Led by Silsby, the Mesquiters came tearing back around the butte to get their horses. Far out across the plain a single horseman dashed toward the southeast. He waved his hat with a defiant grace.

"Eet ees Tom Sykes!" Natalie exclaimed.

"Well—he's safe!" Radford observed, watching the relief in her face with jealous eyes. "Our horses are fagged. He's on a fresh one and a mighty good one. They can't get him."

He was right. The Mesquiters glumly acknowledge it after five minutes' pursuit. They came back growling and swearing vengeance on the Double X.

Without another word to Radford Natalie went up the trail. Even if he had wanted to follow her, the summons that came up to him made it impossible. Silsby called him.

"Say, this hyah butte and the land round ain't wuth a nickel. Nick Bullen sure done Frenchy when he traded him this fur his interest in the Cochinino."

Radford said nothing. He knew Silsby had something behind his observation. His leg hurt and his heart ached. He sat down on a rock and listened. But when he had dragged himself out of the slough of despond in which he had fallen he found himself listening to Silsby to the accompaniment of an involuntary mental repetition of the musical Indian name he had just heard.

"The gal's got nuthin' else, most likely. She can't raise *frijoles* 'nuff to feed her bird on this hyah goodfer-nuthin' rock," Silsby remarked. "Ef she's agreeable, I'd like to git the use uv this hyah spring fur a fair price. Whut d'ye say?"

It was such a radical change of front from the stubborn position Silsby had taken that Ted was surprised. Big Red, however, had apparently experienced no change of heart.

"Frenchy give us the use uv the water. Whut's the use uv payin' fur it jes' 'cause a gal—"

"The gal's got sense! Frenchy wuz a fool 'bout business," Silsby exclaimed.

"The Double X has made her some kind of a proposition," Ted observed.

"Say, young chap, that's whut I want ye fur. Ye're the purty one uv our bunch. I guess Gill's got his beauty a workin' fur him. Ye git up that thar trail—quick—an' make the best terms ye kin with the gal!"

Ted suppressed a disposition to yell. It took all the calm he could summon to keep his rage from boiling over. He was tired and cross, and the almost constant quizzing he endured because of his good looks made it seem an insult that Silsby should use what he made fun of when it was to his advantage.

"Red's the man you want," he retorted hotly. "He's got a face that'd make any woman agree to almost anything."

If Ted hoped for a fuss he was disappointed. Red looked at Silsby with something so akin to fright that the ranchman grinned.

"Whut d'ye say, Red?" he asked.

"I say hell!" Red responded briefly and forcefully.

"That's more'n ye be able to say ef ye wuz face to face with the gal—alone!" Silsby jeered. "Young chap, I reckon ye're the grave-digger fur this hyah funeral."

Silsby turned to Radford. Ted saw that he meant what he said. But he was in no mood to expose himself to Natalie's scorn; and he suspected that he would do more to make her approve of whatever offer Gill made than the offer from Silsby.

"Not on your life," he replied, with a force that told Silsby he meant it. "Go yourself. It's your business!"

He was certain a minute later that no speech of his life had ever made so profound an effect. Silsby glared for a good half-second; then, as plain as the nose on his tanned face, there came an expression that Big Red had lately worn—the look of fear.

Big Red watched it come. But it was not funny to him. The idea Ted had advanced was simply astounding. It took a while for the foreman even to realize that any live person would suggest to Ward Silsby an interview with a woman.

As it simmered and sifted into his cranium, Big Red began to enjoy it. Finally, with his gaze fastened on the stricken Silsby as if he reveled in every shade of his discomfiture, the big fellow burst into a roar like the mingled noise of the Bull of Bashan and a tornado.

Ted could only half appreciate the situation. To him women were as much a part of things in general as men—and much more interesting, especially one. It was impossible for him to think that, till he saw Natalie on the rock pointing a gun at him,

Silsby had not seen a woman for two years.

He never went to Piñon. The boys said he was afraid he might see "a skirt." The prospect of another set-to with the quick-tongued, fire-eyed little French girl filled him with terror. It cheered Ted to see him so miserable; it made up a bit for the ridicule he had endured because of his good looks. Big Red laughed till he ached.

Suddenly "the boss" straightened up as if for some herculean task. He looked at Ted with a large assumption of courage.

"Think I'm scared, don't you, Purty?" he snarled.

"I know you are!" Ted gloated.

"Ye're so all-fired scart that ye don't—"

Big Red stopped in sheer wonder. Silsby was climbing the trail to the Stone House.

CHAPTER XV.

RADFORD GETS A LETTER.

ALICE THORPE looked up from her work to see Silsby. He would have faced a bunch of infuriated steers or the united and belligerent force of the Double X-ers with less discomfort.

Miss Thorpe was worried about Natalie. Occasionally, when she tiptoed to the door of her room, she heard a stifled sob. A whole-hearted disgust with the combination of men and events that had robbed the little French girl of the quiet and calm that had made her overpossessed her. She felt especially hostile to Radford, and she faced Silsby with some of her anger shining in her eyes.

"Say—" was all Silsby could think of at the moment.

"I'm not 'say'; I'm Miss Thorpe. What do you want?" Alice asked.

"I want to buy the right to use the Apache Spring to water my critters," he answered, coming to the point gratefully, as it promised a speedy escape.

"The Double X has—"

"What'll they give you?" Silsby interrupted.

"We set the price; but they haven't decided."

"Make me a price and I'll decide!" Silsby suggested.

"We told them four hundred dollars—"

Silsby stared for a moment. Then he opened his mouth and shut it suddenly. He was swallowing a swear-word.

"Why?" Alice asked, reading the strange signs on his face.

"Well, lady, that thar spring's wuth twice that, easy, to either one uv us. It's the only water-hole in reachin' distance uv the railroad whar we kin bring a big bunch an' keep 'em till they git over the trip. It makes 'em wuth more when we ship—"

"You mean that the use of the Apache Spring is worth eight hundred dollars a year to the owner of the Mesquite Ranch?" Alice asked, excited and pushing the box of colored ribbons from her knees.

Natalie had sent for the materials of her business when they found that Uncle Phillipe's "estate" would not raise beans and afforded no grazing land which could be rented. Natalie must still work at the nerve-straining flowers till Alice could become known in the country as a nurse. Health appeared to be the possession of every one they encountered, so she had no great anticipations.

But the fact that the spring might yield them a living came as a great and delightful revelation. But the thought came with it that this man might be mistaken.

"Mr. Gill thought four hundred dollars was too much. Maybe Mr. Silsby of the Mesquite might not be so willing as you think to pay—"

"I'm Silsby of the Mesquite. I'll pay eight hundred dollars a year," was the quick interruption.

"But Mr. Gill said—" Alice began, afraid of the good luck.

"Ef ye're jedgin' by whut Mr. Gill says when Mr. Gill is buyin', ye're foolish. You'd oughter hear whut Mr. Gill would say ef he was a sellin'," Silsby exclaimed scornfully.

He could see that Gill had expected to get the use of the spring at his own price. It was pleasant to know that he was about to be disappointed. His sense of justice, too, was outraged at the rival ranchman's trying to get ahead of two women.

"Just a moment! I'll call Mlle. le Fevre. She must decide."

Silsby twisted and shifted. An interview with the little lady who had held him up at the spring promised him another bad ten minutes.

"Do I understand that M. Geel is trying to 'do' us?" was the question with which Natalie greeted him.

"That's it!"

Suddenly the relief with which her immediate consideration of business had given him left Silsby. She was close to him, looking straight into his eyes, while her own were clouded and bright by turns.

"You mus' understand, M. Seelsby, that I have not done that cruel theeng to the poor beasts. Eef M. Sykes of the Double X has done eet, eet ees because of me, perhaps; but not at all with my knowledge. He should be punished. He and hees cruel boss, M. Geell. Eet ees surely one dirty Irish of a treeck!"

Silsby's stern mouth expanded into a grin. It was impossible to listen to the polite, and to him affected, "*monsieurs*" applied indiscriminately and to the elegantly accented slang without being hit in his funny spot.

"Eet ees not true?" she demanded imperiously.

"Gill's from Mizzoura," he replied.

In spite of her misery, Natalie laughed.

"Then eet ees one dirty Mizzoura of a treeck!" she corrected.

"Do I get the use of the spring?" Silsby asked, quick to take advantage of her humor.

"Yes. Eet ees a good bargain for me. Come. We weel write it," she answered.

For the first time in twenty years Silsby deliberately crossed a threshold where a woman invited. Frenchy would not have known his big room. Woman touches had petted the furniture into pleasanter relations. Something in him waked after the sleep of what he had thought was death.

He wrote out an agreement, and they all signed.

"'Tain't likely them Double X-ers is a goin' to give in easy. I reckon I'll haf to keep some uv my boys round to make 'em let my critters alone!" he said.

Natalie's slender figure lifted and straightened.

"Eef—eef M. Radford ees left here to guard — then — I tear thees up!"

Silsby snatched the paper from her.

"What the devil—"

"You must promise!" Natalie went on, excited. "Unless you say you weel not let heem come to thees spring I weel not stand by thees! I weel have the Double X—"

The girl was quivering with anger or excitement. Silsby stared at her as she talked, then cut in on her words with a bit of his cool common sense.

"The use uv the spring's wuth more to me than this hyah Radford. I ain't stuck on bein' bossed 'bout whut I do with my own men; but ef it's so much to you to have him out uv the way, I'll keep him thar!"

Natalie silently handed him the agreement she had held. Silsby took it and put it in his pocket before he ran any more risks. Then he freed his mind a bit.

"It gits me why you're so down on this hyah Radford chap when you're keepin' in with Tom Sykes an' the Gill bunch. Gill's done you more dirt than I guess you know. It was him an' Bullen that really put up the game uv tradin' your uncle this hyah rock-pile!"

"Eef M. Bullen has done wrong, he has made eet right now. Eeet was he who gave me the money that enable me to come here."

Natalie le Fevre, for all her bravery, fell back before the fiery-eyed man who advanced on her. Alice Thorpe darted between them.

"Hev ye seen Bullen lately? Whar is he?"

The demand fairly throbbed and hissed with menace and rage. It brought an answer from Miss Thorpe which was the response of fright rather than discretion.

"He's dead! Ask Frederick Radford to tell you—"

Natalie recovered herself. She shot a warning glance at Alice. Silsby had whirled and confronted the nurse.

"Does Radford know—"

Then he, too, paused; but the interruption came from some thought in his own mind. He appeared for a moment to struggle for the stern self-possession that was characteristic of him; then he turned and walked out of the house without any kind of a farewell.

Natalie and Alice stared at one another with expressions of horror growing in their faces.

"Oh! what have you done? He weel inquire! All weel be known! M. Radford weel—"

Natalie sank down into a chair sobbing. Alice, realizing that the silence she had been admonished to keep had been impulsively broken, was beside herself with anger and fright.

"He ought to suffer for what he has done!" she cried, her conscience speaking while her heart was torn with the desperate sobs of the little French girl. "He should be punished—"

"He ees not guilty! He could nevaire have done eet! Oh! eef he did it, it was in mad anger! He did not know—"

Natalie, divided between all the impulses of love that inspired a blind faith and the knowledge of facts that seemed to convict Radford, suddenly gave up the struggle. She slipped down in the chair; and Alice knew that one of the old attacks that came when mind and body warred was on her.

While she worked with all her trained skill to warm the cold little body and revive the slow circulation, Silsby strode down the trail. The look of his face was like the stillness of the volcanic rock about him, perfectly calm, but showing clearly the mighty upheaval of warring forces.

Radford had washed his shirt and was sitting beside the spring while it dried. Silsby saw him, stopped for a moment as if he forced himself to appear as usual, and then came to him.

"Say, Pretty," he began.

"I'll smash your face if you call me that again!" Ted yelled, leaping up, while his strained leg fairly cracked with the effort.

"Don't worry 'bout doin' it!" Silsby retorted. "Ye won't hev to look at it long. Ye're bound for the west range!"

"What for?" Ted demanded, seeing his hopes of ever being able to get near Natalie tumbling down with the information.

"These ladies can't stand you 'round. I jes' got the right to use the water by promisin' to git you out of the neighborhood."

"Great Scott!" Radford exclaimed, realizing with renewed force how little chance he had with Natalie.

"Say, whut d'ye know 'bout Nick Bullen?" Silsby demanded, unable to repress any longer the question that clamored for an answer.

"Me?" Ted asked, surprised. "I know precious little. Why?"

"'Cause I want to know," Silsby replied with an imperative and appealing intensity so curiously blended that Ted answered promptly.

"He came to my home in New York. I haven't the remotest notion why. He keeled over in the library, and I had him put to bed and got a nurse, this Miss Thorpe. When I left he was still there, so I don't—"

"She says he's dead," Silsby interrupted.

"Dead!" Ted exclaimed, amazed. "When?"

He recalled that Natalie had replied to his question about Bullen by saying that they knew nothing.

"Miss Thorpe said to ask you," Silsby replied.

"I—I don't know—I wonder if he died at our house!" Ted exclaimed, interrupting himself as his thoughts ran swiftly to the embarrassment and shock to his mother that might have resulted from the death of a strange man in the house.

"The little one said he give her money to come out hyah. I never knowed Nick Bullen to give nuthin' to nobuddy," Silsby observed grimly.

"He had ten thousand dollars in his belt. He probably thought he would even up for sticking Frenchy on this land—or rock, rather," Ted said.

"It's mighty queer!" Silsby remarked with such peculiar emphasis that Radford looked at him sharply.

"How is it queer?" he asked.

"Nick Bullen never give anything back he got his fingers on! I know. Sounds kinder strange to me thet these hyah wimmin got money that — that was hisn."

"You don't mean to imply that you think they came by it—dishonestly!" Radford exclaimed, his fists clenching and his eyes fixed on Silsby's, as if they demanded the expression of his thought.

"I ain't implyin' nuthin'. I jes' say it's queer—an' it is! Whut gits me is the way some devils gits off easy! Jes' dying neat an' nice in a bed ain't whut I'd planned fur Nick Bullen!"

Radford watched the grim, brown face and the wrathful eyes in silence for a while. Silsby appeared to have much that was disturbing to think out. Ted saw he had forgotten him.

"Say, did you mean that about the west range for me?" he asked finally.

"Reckon so," the ranchman replied indifferently.

"I'll take my pay," Ted said quietly.

It seemed to startle Silsby out of his abstraction. He was short of men. He had taken a liking to Radford, built largely on Red's favorable report. The foreman acknowledged that Radford might have "too much beauty fur his own good, but he hed too much all-fired hard sense fur his boss to be put on."

He had stopped the quizzing from the other boys by telling them that "whut Pretty knowed in a minit they'd never find out long as they lived."

He made it perfectly clear to Silsby that what Radford lacked in experience on the range he more than made up in the quickness of his wits and his impulsive speed. Silsby set about persuading him to stay.

"Look hyah, Radford," he said very seriously, "don't ye let wimmin nur nuthin' connected with wimmin git under yer skin. That's whut makes me hot to hear that Bullen's died easy. It was a woman an' him thet—thet knocked the puddin' out uv things fur me. She wuz my wife, an' they wuz a kid two years old. We wuz prospectin' together; an' I got a claim thet I wuz keepin' dark. 'Course I tole her. Bullen got sweet on her an' worked it out uv her where 'twas at. Then he put through the papers an' hiked."

Radford felt his sympathy going out to the man who was breaking the silence of nearly twenty years and showing the effects of it. He listened without a word; and Silsby swallowed hard and went on. The death of Nick Bullen had dug like a sharp plow through the hardened surface of his nature and was turning up the buried feelings of years.

"I wuz so—so—I thought she wuz jes' right! She tole me whut she'd done after she knowed he'd gone. I didn't haf to fergive her; I jes' loved her. But somehow it kinder worked in her till her—she got kinder crazy. An' one day, when I come home, I found her an' the kid—"

Silsby paused. The wind sang its

plaintive and monotonous dirge among the rocks. Radford scarcely breathed.

"She done the shootin'; but—Bullen killed 'em both!"

Still Radford was silent. There seemed no sympathy so fitted to the tragedy told with such simple force as the sympathy of silence.

"An' Bullen died easy!" Silsby exclaimed with a flash of resentment that reminded Ted of the gleam of a sword as it leaped from the scabbard. "Ye ain't got no other job in view, Radford?"

Ted shook his head as Silsby put by sentiment and determinedly faced business.

"Better stay with me, then. 'Cause these wimmin is hand an' glove somehow with Bullen—"

"I don't believe that!" Radford interjected.

"Well, even ef they wasn't, 'tain't no reason you should give up a good job ef ye ain't got another. You git off to the ranch an' think about it."

Ted accepted the advice. It seemed to him that many lowering suggestions of trouble had suddenly come into the bright yellow world he had known with such satisfaction. Influences that were reminders of his dismal and worried days in New York after he knew himself ruined seemed to exert themselves to depress him now as they had then.

Bullen's death, the fact which Silsby seemed to think was peculiar, that Miss Thorpe and Natalie had profited by it, his own banishment and its indication of how very badly he stood with them—all were the miserable accompaniments of his ride westward, while his aching limb hurt him worse and worse with every step of his horse.

Again and again, like an insect with a poisonous sting, the thought of Natalie's saying she knew nothing of Bullen and its connection with the facts that she knew he was dead and had had the money to come West as a legacy from him kept coming to him. It filled him with vague forebodings; but when he tried to dissect and find out just what menaced her he could not.

He made up his mind to win Natalie le Fevre and then watch over and care for her with all the strength of his body and the love of his heart. As he rode he brought himself to believe that a full explanation of everything to Bess would influence not only her mercenary ambitions, but her better nature.

If he frankly and positively said he loved another woman with the whole power of his being he believed that her pride and the depths of goodness in her, which her rearing had buried, would prompt her to release him.

It occurred to him that it might make his freedom to woo Natalie more certain if he wrote Mrs. Hetherington that he had definitely cast his lot in this Western country, that he would positively refuse whatever provision Mr. Barrington might be influenced by his mother to make.

His best self and Natalie seemed to cry out for him to give up all of the old life since he could only retain it at great sacrifice of better things. A conviction came that, if Natalie le Fevre ever was his wife, it would be because he won her through proof of his own manhood.

His sudden rush West had been one of the old impulses. This new decision to stay and grow with the country was the real turning-point of his life, the fixed purpose born in him to pursue the path which his reason and his higher nature approved.

He hobbled from the corral to the living-room of the ranch-house. A kerosene-lamp stood on the table; and he lighted it to look over the mail that was always laid there.

There was a letter for him, addressed in his mother's writing. He tore it open and read the first sentence.

"Bess has decided on the 2nd of September for the wedding."

With a sound that mingled the rage and despair of an oath and a groan,

he sank down in a chair, clutching the letter and staring with angry eyes at the destruction of the castles in the air he had been building.

Dawn found him there.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DOUBLE HOLD-UP.

"BESS has decided on the 2nd of September for the wedding."

That one sentence had destroyed everything for Radford. The hopelessness of his position came to him by premonition. He seemed scarcely to need to read the rest of the letter. His fate was decided for him, and entirely in a different way from which he had done it himself.

His mother rejoiced with her especial brand of enthusiasm because of the decision. Now he must come home. Mr. Barrington would welcome him as his own son.

Ted read that part with savage desperation. It was what was making Bess hurry the wedding. She found that Mr. Barrington had talked with Bess and had told her if she would arrange the wedding for September or sooner, he would settle a million each on her and on Ted and would make him his heir after his wife. It all meant that the whole of Barrington's immense fortune would eventually be Frederick Radford's.

He grimly faced the fact that nothing but absolute refusal to marry Bess would call off her mother from the fortune. He was ready to wire that he would not marry. He felt the indignity he would offer Bess and himself—but his feeling for Bess was rapidly undergoing a change.

With his new knowledge of what love really was, he was perfectly sure Bess did not feel it for him. Either unconsciously or otherwise, she was marrying him for money. He saw a future of passive misery on that account which instantly became one of poignant, never-ceasing pain when he thought that it shut Natalie from him permanently.

It was the most wonderful piece of bad luck that ever came to a human being. To be assured of wealth beyond the dreams of even an active visionary, but with a condition that closed the door of heaven was too much for Ted's endurance.

He stamped out of the room and into the wonder of the morning; and, with every breath, he swore at things in general and Hugo Barrington in particular.

Barrington was the one who was fixing his fate upon him. His generosity was making the man he thought to benefit the victim of a mercenary girl and her mother, when a little creature with heart as pure as dew and eyes in which lay the promise of heaven, might have been his.

He thought over Barrington's extraordinary liberality. He was sure he had felt the same aversion which Ted knew had risen in him against his stepfather. It was hard to understand why he should have made his remarkable promises.

Another page in his mother's letter explained. A girl in her twenties and in the midst of her first love-affair would have written as she did. As he read, Radford was forced to a more favorable estimate of his stepfather. He was evidently wildly in love.

Ted knew his mother's charm, her versatility and the delightful spontaneity with which she responded to the appreciation that her beauty won. He could imagine that the grim man of big affairs, who had fought his way to the fortune which enabled him to win her, was finding reward for his struggles in the luxuriant and inspirational nature of his lovely mother.

It was easy for Ted to appreciate how Barrington was getting rest and recreation from the intensity of his career in his association with the responsive, beautiful woman. And he, Frederick Alan Radford, was reaping the benefit.

At least his mother thought so. He

felt tenderer toward her, realizing that her maternal devotion had a depth he had not suspected. She did not dream that he was being married by Bess Hetherington for the money she was securing for him.

He was in the absurd position which the world dictates so positively. It demanded that he stick to his bad bargain, so long as Bess wished it.

Impelled by a last desperate wish to tell Natalie exactly how things were, hoping that one little evidence of her own desire that he should would give him excuse for breaking with Bess, and thereby acquire the position of dishonor that his world would open to him, he started back toward the Stone House.

He had been in the saddle almost continuously for a day and a night, part of the time with a strained leg to add to the difficulties of his riding. But he plodded along, groaning occasionally, dreading the growing heat and staring wearily toward the direction of the Stone House long before he could hope to see it.

His thoughts were confused. His head was throbbing—and the blood seemed to jump in hot spurts through his body. But he meant to see Natalie. He meant to tell how he had believed his engagement a matter easy to settle, that he had regarded it as virtually ended when he told her of his love, that he had not dreamed of hurting her, that he loved her better than his life and his mother and money and Bess.

He reached the butte and left his horse, then climbed up the trail toward the Stone House along the route that Sykes had used. It was almost more than he could do—but he gritted his teeth and persisted.

Two hours later Alice came to the door to shut it against the heat. She saw him lying there in the grilling sun, face downward. She ran out and saw the red face of the man she had hoped never to encounter again. He mumbled and lifted his dull eyes to hers with recognition.

She had no choice. Humanity dictated and she must obey. She called Natalie. For a second the little girl stood in the doorway, looking at the man. Then she ran to him with an ineffable look and gesture that struck despair to the heart of Alice Thorpe.

If she had been able to encourage a doubt that Natalie was only transiently interested in Radford, it was dispelled by the look and the hungry, eager little hands that tried to pillow his head from resting on the hot stone.

Radford would not move. He was deaf even to Natalie's voice. They tried again and again to get him out of the sun which was doing its best to kill him.

Miss Thorpe looked at him with professional but hopeless eyes. Natalie read the glance. A moment more she was in and out of the house with an umbrella which she pushed into Alice's hand, then sped along the trail toward the spring.

She came back with Silsby and Big Red. They got him inside. Red told of the struggle to save the steers in which he must have hurt his leg. For three days they fought with fever and the cruel strain in the leg. The cowboys carried the cold water from the spring with which Alice managed gradually to reduce the fever.

Silsby was with Ted when he suddenly sat up in bed, apparently as rational as ever. He wrote out the wire which Radford said had to go East at once.

> Can't marry you. I love some one else.
>
> TED.

He was especially careful about the address and insisted that Silsby himself take the message into Piñon at once. As the ranchman went out of the room Radford sank into a stupor which did not change for days. But the wire went East to Bess.

But Alice had sent word to Dr. Stratton that Ted was ill, so dangerously ill that his mother and his *fiancée* ought to be in readiness to come in response to the next message she would send if things had not decidedly changed for the better.

Mrs. Barrington insisted on Bess coming to Cressymere to be ready in case the worst news came. So it was there that Bess received Ted's own message. It was delivered as she sat with her host and hostess on the terrace.

"Well!"

Outraged pride and a strange relief blended in her expression. She tossed the yellow paper to Mrs. Barrington.

"Why!" was her astounded exclamation.

Barrington reached for the surprise-creating missive. He read it, but did not speak.

"He has lost his mind!" his mother cried after a moment of stupefied silence.

As a matter of fact, he was regaining it. In the long stupor his nature righted itself. Miss Thorpe saw him improve, though he did not waken. She piled the yellow envelopes with which his mother and Barrington had besieged him and which he could not read, in a neat little heap beside his bed.

He was in the big room now for the sake of the coolness. One day he waked—to find Miss Thorpe asleep beside him, in her chair. She had watched through many nights—and her eyes were eager to rest from their vigil.

Ted waited and watched. He discovered that a certain little figure did not cross the big room. The next day he had convinced Miss Thorpe that she might rest, that he needed no one to stay with him.

Then, with an elaborate pretense of being very sound asleep, he lay and waited. Ten minutes after Miss Thorpe had gone to lie down, he heard a light step in the room. He kept up his "possuming." She came closer—and a cool, little hand touched his forehead.

With praiseworthy celerity Ted caught it. He opened his eyes suddenly—poppylike the face above his own glowed and shone. He was strong enough to hold the hand—it stayed, fluttering, in his clasp.

"Natalie, listen a minute. I thought I should be free. I didn't mean to hurt you. I love you. I wouldn't hurt your heart or your pride or—why, I'd shoot myself first!"

Few women fight the battle that Natalie was called upon to wage. She loved Radford utterly. But she hated anything mean or cruel. She was in the awful position of despising herself for loving what she hated. She fought against her faith in him with her reason—and kept loving him.

Ted watched the red fade from her cheeks—she turned very white. He saw that she resented his attempt to make her listen.

"It's no use!" he groaned.

Natalie slipped like a shadow from the room—and Radford felt his hope of winning her dying in his heart.

Radford accepted the absence of Natalie from his sick-room with the desperate submission of a man strapped and tied and unable to help himself. He longed for just one thing—to get well and away.

The night after his effort to talk with her he was tossing on his bed when he saw a shape in the darkness outside the door left open for air. He lay still and watched.

He heard the slow dragging of the stones with which the mosquito-net curtain was held down. Then he knew he had not been deceived by his own eyes.

Instantly he thought of two explanations of the nocturnal visitor. It was some one trying to steal or—and the last explanation took tightest hold upon him—it was his one enemy in the country, Tom Sykes.

Drunk with jealousy or brandy, he could imagine that the Southerner had crept up the trail to see whether invalidism had brought any privileges to his rival, or to finish him lest it should.

Ted lay there, not greatly caring what happened. About all life seemed to offer him was a beautiful bride and millions of dollars, and his desires were for something incomparably more and divinely different.

The figure in the door was gone. The vague darkness of the netting again waved softly in the blowing of the night wind. But a sound inside the door informed Radford that the prowler had passed under the net and into the room.

Something in him stirred. He felt a sudden access of strength, and a positive wish to live and have another try at getting what he wanted took possession of him. It seemed to concentrate his energies in his eyes and ears.

He kept track of the presence that slowly approached him, following the wall probably since he could only hear, not see it. He watched where the grayish black of a window cut the gloom of the room out in a large square. His stealthy companion in the big room must pass it to reach him.

A chill that ran like queer pronged lightning along his spine told Radford that he was both excited and afraid. He found himself counting his own heart-beats with a weird curiosity to see how many could be squeezed in before the creeping menace stopped them. For he was impressed with a conviction that the person who approached him meant to kill.

Radford began suddenly to count his chances for defending himself. He had no gun. His strength was unreliable. He must shout to the women; and his whole nature rebelled against doing it.

It would be a better return for their conscientious service to him, a service which he knew was not inspired by any love, to die quietly rather than scare them and bring them to the dangers of a struggle with a man who would probably be desperate if they discovered him.

He would make as little fuss as possible about being killed. The idea had a kind of grim humor for him. He took a long, noiseless breath, his wits cleared, and he discovered that the intruder was fumbling about at the foot of his bed.

His clothes hung there; but it was too absurd to suppose that any one would be searching them. He waited with every inch and idea in him alert and ready for something, anything.

Suddenly his body jumped involuntarily. He felt the pressure of a gun on his breast.

"Don't git excited!" some one cautioned. "I ain't a goin' to hurt ye ef ye behave! Hev ye got the deed to the Cochinino Mine with ye?"

Almost too much amazed to reply, Ted whispered "No," in answer to the jabbing of the gun.

"Where's it at?" the voice demanded, the voice that was unmistakably not Sykes's voice.

"I—I don't know—"

"Cut it! Is it over at the Mesquite?" the man asked.

A bright idea came to Ted. This man had mistaken him for some one else who had a deed he wanted.

"Say, you've got the wrong chap!" he exclaimed.

"Ain't ye Radford?" the man asked.

Ted thought for an instant of saying that he was not, since Radford appeared to be in requisition as the individual into whom a pistol was to be punched disconcertingly. But something told him not to play with chance. He acknowledged that he was.

"Then whar's that deed?" the man demanded.

"Lord!" Ted breathed, as the gun reminded him of its presence again. "I can't think of any old deed ever written that I wouldn't fork over—"

"The Cochinino deed's all I want!" the man cut in.

Suddenly Ted remembered where he had heard the strange name.

"Say, I haven't got anything by that name. I heard Silsby mention the name, but it's the only time in my life I ever—"

"Shut up! Listen! I know ye got it! Nick Bullen sent me word—"

"Don't move! Else I make you dead as M. Bullen!"

The gun gouged down into Ted's

breast as the man started at the unwelcome interruption. But it steadied, to his relief, as the hold-up man got over his surprise.

The light, firm voice was more astounding than a shout would have been. Even Ted, familiar as he was with the two doors and the windows of the room, could not tell exactly whence it came. He could guess from the slightly changing pressure of the gun that the man was peering about in the darkness and trying to locate it.

"I see you plainly because of the window behind you!" Natalie went on with quiet confidence of holding the situation in her own hands.

"I reckon ye cain't see me plain enuff to know I'm 'bout to pull the trigger of this hyah gun I got nailed to yer beau's hide!"

Radford shut his eyes and clenched his teeth. The man's infernal cleverness warned him that he might as well prepare for death if any impulsive move of Natalie's threatened discovery of his identity. Ted understood by a flash of intuition that the man would do anything to avoid that. If Natalie made one false step, lost her nerve for a second, and broke the tension of the situation suddenly, he was sure that the report of the gun would follow instantly. He lay there stiff with hideous anticipation.

"Eef you were to shoot thees man eet would be bad for you—M. Geell!"

The man swore as the name dropped coolly from the invisible lips. Ted opened his eyes and his mouth in sheer wonder.

Natalie had guessed who the midnight visitor was. Gill of the Double X was holding a pistol at his heart and demanding something of which he had only heard the name. Why?

CHAPTER XVII.

RADFORD HEARS AN AMAZING QUESTION

RADFORD came back from the shore of death in great leaps. Somewhere in the darkness Natalie was aiming at "M. Geell." And M. Geell was poking his gun into his chest muscles with a neighborly insistence that was more obnoxious the longer it continued.

"Say, you two. Listen to me!" he commanded, the irritation of the gun infusing such force into his words that both Gill and Natalie listened with half their attention while the other half was concentrated on each other.

"Gill, you're punching your gun into my ribs; and Mlle. le Fevre's got hers trained on you. Whatever you do to each other, you're pretty sure to finish me. I tell you to call a halt and explain what it is you want about this deed business! Let's talk business!"

"Suits me ef the lady's willin'," Gill answered gruffly. "I'd be a fool to shoot you when they'se somebuddy so sure uv who I am. Anyway, it ain't up to me to git hung fur doin' another man a favor!"

"Not a bit of it!" Ted agreed with enthusiasm, a little misty about the favor part, but certain of anything that promised the removal of the pistol.

His spirits rose to such heights that he lifted his hand and gently pushed aside the gun. Gill let him do it, which was a still further advance from the dead-line where he had tottered a moment since.

"What's this Cochinino matter you've been talking about?" he asked.

"I want that paper ye've got!" Gill said.

Suddenly a light sped like a fine sword of silver through the gloom. It rested on Gill's amazed face, holding him silent and dazed for a second. Alice Thorpe, in the darkness behind Natalie, had leveled the ray of a pocket electric lamp at him.

Radford could have laughed. The women had the amateur hold-up man so completely at a disadvantage. They both saw his face and could possibly identify him.

"Mlle. le Fevre, will you light the lamp?" Ted requested, still keeping his hand on the barrel of Gill's gun.

Ted saw Miss Thorpe standing in the door, more armed than gowned. Her keen eyes said to Mr. Gill: "Now we've got you!" She was not especially inclined to be considerate; the way he had tried to get the use of the spring at half-price rankled in her.

Natalie turned as the lamp shed its light and looked at Radford with an anxiety that he saw plainly. It made him happier than he had been for days.

"Now, Gill, what's it all about?" he asked.

"Aw! I reckon ye know the claim ye've got on the Cochinino!" Gill exclaimed crossly.

"I know you came to rob me of it if I have got it. But I haven't! What's this Cochinino—"

Gill struck in as if he wanted the business of which he had made a bungle over.

"Al Watson thought Nick Bullen—"

Radford sat up in bed. Natalie and Miss Thorpe drew nearer.

"Mr. Gill, I'll be obliged to you if you'll explain who this Nick Bullen is. I've had enough trouble about him to make me curious."

Gill looked uneasily about the big room. Natalie lifted the gun she held. Radford gripped the barrel still in his hands.

"Bullen an' Watson an' Frenchy owned the Cochinino Mine together. It wuz to belong to the other two ef one died ur to any one uv the three ef the other two died. They thought 'twas goin' to be a winner. They worked it a while an' it went back on 'em. Bullen soaked some feller back East with his share. Watson found out an' thought he'd go him one better, so he traded this hyah rock-pile to Frenchy fur his share, an' was a goin' to sell it all to some other sucker."

"Where do you come in?" Ted asked suddenly.

"Jes' whar the ten thousand plunks wuz that I was goin' to git ef I froze to that paper you've got," Gill answered grimly.

"If the mine's no good, what's the hurry about a deed to it?" Ted questioned.

"Search me?" Gill answered laconically.

"Where's this Al Watson?" Ted asked.

"Ain't heerd uv him fur years," was the reply.

"You don't seem much stuck on this robbing business, Mr. Gill," Radford observed.

"I ain't. Ef it wasn't the money, an' Nick Bullen a askin' it—"

"Mr. Gill, you're lying. Nick Bullen is dead!" Alice Thorpe exclaimed, her anger at Gill's effort to cheat Natalie rising to join the belief that he was making the kind of a story which he thought would get him clear of the predicament in which he had placed himself.

"Say, Gill, were you to get ten thousand dollars for this hold-up?" Ted asked suddenly, apparently disregarding what Miss Thorpe had said.

"Yep."

Radford turned toward the two women.

"Bullen promised him all he had! There was ten thousand in that belt! It was because he thought I had this deed that he came to the house. By Jove! it's a queer mix-up!" he exclaimed.

"When did you make this plan with Mr. Bullen?" Alice asked, while Natalie shook with the alternating chill of hope and the old fear.

It seemed almost as if this were the explanation of Bullen's strange presence in the Radford house. It might be that events would prove Ted guiltless of his death. Hope leaped and sank as she listened.

"I got his wire on the tenth of this month."

All three of his listeners started, Alice and Natalie with the most marked surprise, Ted because he saw them so moved. Then Alice Thorpe approached Gill like the incarnate spirit of punishment.

"I knew you couldn't tell the truth.

Nick Bullen was—he died on the morning of May 12—weeks ago!"

Gill and Radford were both staring at her; but each wore a different expression. Gill's was scornful incredulity; Radford's sheer wonder.

"That's the day I left New York!" Ted exclaimed, remembering that Natalie had said they knew nothing of Bullen and finding out now that they had known of his death on the very day he left home.

"I ain't the liar in this hyah instance!" was what Gill said, pulling a yellow paper from his pocket and thrusting it in front of Radford.

"Ten thousand for you if you get deed to Coch Mine from party named in wire last week," was what he read, and the name, Nick Bullen, was signed.

"So you've had your eye on me?" Ted exclaimed.

The ranchman nodded. Alice Thorpe took the paper out of Ted's hands. She stared at the name as if her eyes were becoming unreliable.

"He's dead! I know he's dead!" she cried. "This is some scheme that I don't understand; but I know Nick Bullen is dead."

"I know he ain't!" Gill asserted roughly.

"Oh, M. Geell! do you surely know that?" Natalie asked, coming toward the big ranchman with eyes full of pleading.

It would mean that some awful mistake had fastened a horrible doubt, a cruel suspicion on Radford. She scarcely breathed as she thought that the ranchman's next words might clear away what, to save her brave soul and warm heart, she could not believe.

"I've had two wires from him! I guess he ain't a telegraphin' from hell nur no place like that!" Gill answered.

"I have letters from Dr. Stratton stating positively the time and the manner of Nick Bullen's death," Alice asserted.

"From Midge Stratton?" Ted exclaimed. "He hasn't said a word about it to me."

"I guess not! He thought you knew all you wanted to!" Alice flashed.

Radford looked at the righteously indignant Miss Thorpe with eyes so completely uncomprehending that Natalie took a step toward him impulsively before her reason reproved her.

"I don't know a blessed thing about it. And I asked him especially in a letter."

Ted could not, of course, know with what scorn his friend had read what seemed an effort to appear ignorant in order to divert suspicion. It had made the thought leap in Midge's mind, to be urged by a responsive leap in his blood, that it was little short of criminal to be one of the number who would deliver Bess to the keeping of a coward as well as a man guilty of worse misdoing.

Midge had had his hours of misery. If he had felt sure of Ted's being the actual criminal he would have taken a positive stand, and would have wrested the girl he loved from any such abominable union.

But he had the intuition to see that Bess was her mother's daughter in many ways; and he dared not, so long as she did not express a more positive rebellion against the prospective marriage, take any steps which would stir up the suspicion against Ted.

It was too serious a thing to be the one to blame for starting the question of a man's guilt, especially when the crime was the awful one of murder.

"Say, Gill," Ted exclaimed, suddenly coming out of the tangled strands of thoughts which were twisting him up hopelessly the more he tried to straighten them. "This deed you're talking about must be something better than a claim on a good-for-nothing mine! A man wouldn't offer you ten thousand dollars for it if—"

Radford saw the sly look that spread over Gill's face. He stopped and waited for him to speak.

"If I wuz to tell ye whut I think 'bout that deed, would ye let me off without this hyah deal, jes' keep mum 'bout it?" Gill asked.

"It's nothing to me," Ted observed.

"Ef ye've got that deed—"

"Well, I haven't."

"Anyway, whoever has got it has got somethin' Nick Bullen wants bad. An' he ain't a wantin' whut ain't wuth nothin'!" Gill observed, clearly not shaken in his belief that the mysterious Nick Bullen was still alive and making trouble, even though he heard what sounded like proof to the contrary.

"Great gophers!"

The exclamation slipped from Radford's lips before he could stop it. He remembered the papers Marsh had turned over to him, remarking that they were of no value.

He had never even troubled to look them over. They lay in his trunk at the Mesquite ranch-house. What if one of them were the deed to the Cochinino and that Cochinino had turned out good?

The thought came like a great, blinding light to Ted. If it were true, he could have at least the sinews of war to use in the fight for freedom from his outgrown obligations and to win the girl he really loved.

"Whut's up?" Gill demanded curiously.

"It's this confounded leg of mine," Ted lied quickly.

Now he had but one thought. He wanted to get rid of Gill, get out of bed, get on his horse, get to the ranch-house, and—get that paper.

"Well, Gill, this is all very interesting, but it's embarrassing for you. Three of us can prove that you've been trying to rob me. I guess the best you can do for yourself is to light out! And just keep it in mind that I haven't got any kind of a paper that will make it advisable for you to bother me again!"

Gill was too much interested in getting away to care particularly about the manner of accomplishing his desire. He started toward the door post-haste. He was disgusted with his job. He had heard Ted deny and deny again having the deed while a gun nuzzled in his ribs. He had come on a fool's errand and proved its folly by getting caught on the job.

Radford listened till the sound of his footsteps on the stones was quite lost. Then he turned toward Natalie with his blue eyes shining.

"Natalie! I believe I have that paper!"

She looked at him in a kind of daze of admiration. The courage with which he had said he had no deed to the Cochinino when Gill threatened him was quite overwhelming.

But he had the grace to laugh and own up.

"I didn't know I had it or I might not have been so brave. I thought I was telling the truth. But I have a paper which my lawyer turned over—I imagine there are several papers in the envelope—but I never looked at them. It may be one of those! And if it is—"

Radford's voice and eyes said a hundred confusing things. Alice Thorpe started between him and Natalie, as if she suspected that the little lady might heed one of their demands and go to the invalid.

"By George! If I've got that I'm not a pauper, after all; and I'll see if I can't change things around a little. Are those my clothes?"

He pointed toward the foot of the bed. Energy fairly radiated from him. His practical question touched off the fuse of Miss Thorpe's anger. It looked to her as if he might profit even more than the nine thousand dollars through Nick Bullen. It seemed like an undue reward to the wicked. Her sense of justice was rampant.

"You have on one of M. le Fevre's shirts! Don't go off with that!" she snapped, with an inflection which inferred that he had already too much for his scanty deserts.

"Wait till I get my fortune!" Ted crowed. "I'll give you a whole trunkful of shirts!"

"You'll give me nothing! I wouldn't touch anything of yours with tongs if I could help it!"

Radford appreciated that his mild joke had fallen on very inhospitable ears. He was too sincerely grateful for the care they had taken of him to want to offend. He hurried into an apology.

"Miss Thorpe, I was just joking! I never can thank you—and Mlle. le Fevre for your kindness to me."

"We'd have done the same to a sick —animal," she retorted.

"At least, I have the advantage of the—dog," he replied, hurt but forcing himself to speak lightly. "I can say—thank you."

Miss Thorpe pulled Natalie from the room. It was so plain that she wanted to get the little lady away from the dangerous and pestilential neighborhood of their invalid guest that Ted stared for a moment at the door through which they had gone, quite diverted from the one thought that had before possessed him.

He forgot his determination to get to the Mesquite ranch and his trunk in worrying over the deeply hidden cause of Miss Thorpe's aversion.

He knew he was not repulsive. Other girls had liked him. It was this grim Miss Thorpe who incited Natalie to her persistent mistreatment of him. He was sure of it. He did not minimize the hurt he had given Natalie's pride in telling of his love when he was engaged to another girl.

But he was certain Miss Thorpe magnified every one of his shortcomings. He felt instinctively that love like his must have waked at least a desire to be kind in the heart of a girl who had listened to him pour it forth.

He dressed and felt stronger and less stiff than he had expected. As he made his way toward the door he went cautiously. He had slipped his gun in his belt; and he was ready in case Mr. Sykes should turn up unexpectedly.

For it had come to him that Sykes must still enjoy some favor at the Stone House, else Gill would scarcely have been so much at home in his movements or well-informed about the location of his bed, which ordinarily was not in the big room.

He sat down on the veranda and gave himself up to gloomy guesses about the number of times Sykes had found a chance to touch Natalie's warm arm under the guise of helping her over the rocks.

His rush to leave the Stone House had given place to common sense. He could not manage to get down the trail to the spring safely until he had light enough to see his way. There he was sure to find some of the herders with the cattle, perhaps Red or Silsby might be about.

His own horse must be somewhere in charge of the Mesquite men. With it he meant to make his way to the ranch and examine the envelope and its contents. As he sat there the idea that perhaps that paper might mean financial independence of Barrington, toward whom his aversion grew by an inverse ratio to his generosity, lost its inspirational charm. What good would it do even if he had money of his own? Bess evidently meant to hold him. Maybe she really did love him. At any rate, he could see no decent way of getting out of the engagement to which she was still agreeable.

It was a confounded code that demanded that he should marry a girl he did not love and whom he suspected was not particularly in love with him, just because he had asked her to marry him when he knew no better. But it was the way things were in the misfitted, mangled, generally disagreeable scheme of things. He would have it to do.

He knew no more about the telegram he had dictated to Silsby in the delirium which deceived the ranchman into

thinking him conscious of what he did than if he had never spoken it.

All at once his gloomy musings were cut short by the sound of a step he knew. He heard his name called softly inside the house. But he kept still. If Natalie became sufficiently anxious about him, if she cared at all, she would come outside to look for him when she saw he was not in the bed.

Praying that there was in her one spark of the love which was a consuming flame in him, he moved over in the very deepest shadow of the house. If she knew that his presence in the house had been known to Sykes, and had, through him, reached the ears of the man who had come to mistreat him, she must feel some concern about his welfare—she must dread lest the young Southerner himself take a hand in the game with him.

"Come, come, come!" his heart beat while his mind repeated over and over —"I love you, Little Bitter-Sweet! I want you—I want you!"

It seemed to him the fervor and concentration of his prayer must reach and woo her. But, in spite of his hope, he almost gasped when she actually came through the door, holding back the netting with a small hand that shone pearly-white in the gloom.

As he looked across her shoulder he saw a brave silver star emerge from behind the heavy clouds that covered the sky. Its steady brightness cheered him.

Still he did not speak. He waited till Natalie crossed the stone floor. He meant to get between her and the door before he revealed himself.

But she seemed bent on some especial errand. She went away from the house toward the trail which led down on the opposite side of the butte from the spring.

He followed her quietly, rejoicing at every step, for the greater distance she put between herself and Miss Thorpe the better were his chances to talk to her uninterruptedly.

The lone star had been the daring leader of a silver host. They came forth in shimmering panoply of power. With diamond lances of light they seemed to fight the clouds from the sky.

Radford could see Natalie distinctly now as she moved along over the rocks. His heart was singing. She was hurrying toward the trail to see if he had descended there, hoping to find the horse he had left somewhere in the neighborhood of the ascent to the house.

She reached a little natural landing in the trail. Radford thought he could risk overtaking her. The place was away from the house, sheltered by close high rocks, just the spot for the conversation in which he meant to lay bare his heart and plead with her for a tenderer memory than she could possibly have if he went back to the duty that called him and left her to think that she had been a mere episode in the experience of a rich young adventurer.

Loverlike, he deceived himself with the thought that this was farewell, that all he would ask of her when he had poured out his love and told her that it was the one deep and abiding emotion that would claim his silent fidelity all his life, was assurance that she would think kindly of him.

The insatiable craving to hear her voice, to be near her, to try hungrily to gain one little hint that she was not utterly unresponsive to the love that swayed him, disguised itself so cleverly that he did not recognize it himself.

He opened his lips to call her when a tall, dark figure stepped from behind the rocks. It was Tom Sykes.

Natalie started.

"What have you done to heem?" she cried.

"I reckon you mean Gill?" Sykes returned. "I come to hold his hoss while he interviewed that thar rich gazabo. He's went home."

A curious silence followed Sykes's explanation—he must have realized that it was scarcely an answer to her peculiar question.

"Who you talkin' about?" he asked, as if he began to suspect some other

significance to her question than the one he had attached to it.

"About M. Geell, of course," Natalie answered quickly.

Ted could have shouted. He knew what Sykes did not—that Natalie had discovered the absence of the invalid. He knew she had asked about him—and the proof of her concern filled him with exultant joy.

"Gill said Radford ain't got that deed!" Sykes went on savagely. "Gill's a fool! He'd oughter blowed off his head 'fore he let up on gittin' it!"

"Eef he has not the deed, how should eet help to blow hees head?" Natalie asked tremulously, while Ted gratefully acknowledged his debt to the fate that had sent Gill instead of Sykes after the paper.

"He's got it, all right! He's out here to locate the other two, that's whut he's hyah fur. Them's whut Bullen's after, too. Mebby Bullen's got Watson's by this time—no one ain't heerd uv Watson fur a long time. Ef he has, nachully he's more'n anxious fur the one that Radford's got."

Ted began to see why Bullen had perpetrated himself upon him in New York. But he was too intent upon hearing what Sykes had evidently learned from Gill to think of anything else at the moment.

"Nick Bullen ees dead!" Natalie exclaimed impatiently.

"Somebody's bin stuffin' ye!" Sykes instantly replied. "Gill's had a half a dozen letters from him sence this hyah Radford come into these hyah parts. An' he's had three wires in the last three days. Bullen ain't no deader'n I am."

Natalie was gazing into Sykes's face as if every word he uttered meant more to her than any sounds she had ever heard. She could not reconcile his statements with what she knew—but the relief, the ecstasy of listening to him declare positively that Bullen was not dead was such joy that her heart almost burst her breast. Love rioted in her and faith flew as high as heaven.

Suddenly, and in a voice that was the strangest blending of rapture and pain, she cried out. She seized and almost shook big Tom Sykes as she did it.

"Tell me again! Eet ees true? You are sure! Eet ees not true that M. Radford has keeled Neeck Bullen?"

Radford actually fell back against the rocks as if he had received a physical blow. He had heard it plainly. There was no room for doubt. Her own dear voice, high and tense, had said it. Natalie le Fevre believed him guilty of murder!

CHAPTER XVIII.

RADFORD IS MISSING.

So that was why Natalie le Fevre would have nothing to do with him! She believed he had killed Nick Bullen!

In the extremity of his discouragement and horror Ted forgot that Natalie was trying to find corroboration of his innocence. He did not guess what she had suffered. He could not know the joy with which she listened to the declarations of Gill and Sykes that Bullen still lived.

So wildly eager was she to believe that she put aside the urging of her own level little head and would not let herself recall the fact that the proof of Bullen's death was contained in Dr. Stratton's letters to Alice Thorpe.

But nothing seemed to count to Ted but the hideous fact that she suspected him of the blackest of all crimes. Why he was supposed to have killed Bullen was beyond him. He thought of rushing toward Natalie and asking her that.

The cutting sting of her scorn had fallen on him too often for him to court it again. And somehow, though he heard Sykes declare that Bullen still lived, he heard in Natalie's voice the doubt she felt much more clearly than he distinguished her wish to have him proven innocent.

Proven innocent! The indignity of having to establish his freedom from the crime was almost more than he

could endure in silence. A wrath that nearly overcame his scruples about exposing himself in his weakened condition to Sykes's jealous rage took possession of him. He clutched at the rocks and made himself be still.

And all the time Natalie was clamoring for something that would be proof of such positive nature that Dr. Stratton might be supposed to have made a terrible mistake.

Sykes reiterated what he had said about the letters and the wires. Gill had not mentioned the letters—and Natalie questioned Sykes closely, so closely that it was impossible to believe him wrong.

He had brought the letters from Piñon himself; and Gill, knowing he had no love for the "rich gazabo," had read them, and explained that a deed to an interest in a mine was in his possession.

It took all of his keenness of mind to interpret Natalie's questions. She was in a peculiar position. Sykes's jealousy flamed up whenever an inquiry of hers indicated an undue interest or anxiety about Radford. He seized upon what she said about Radford's killing Bullen with an avidity which showed how eagerly he would have welcomed any disaster that might befall his rival.

But it was a strong argument in favor of Bullen still being among the living, that he did not take more stock in the suspicion that Radford had killed him. Natalie treasured the singular proof as if it were the most precious of all things in the world. Yet Ted could tell as he listened that Sykes's statement did not convince her against the testimony she had to substantiate the death of Bullen.

Ted felt that Bullen was dead. But who had killed him and why, he could not guess.

"Dr. Stratton saw the body of Neeck Bullen," Natalie said as if to affirm what he had just thought.

"I don't know who Doc Stratton is —but I guess he's got somebody else mixed with the corpse," Sykes said with unshaken faith.

But Ted knew that Bullen had been Stratton's patient. He knew that Midge would not be mistaken in so vital a matter. And again, the awful fact that he was suspicioned with some connection with the Westerner's death hit him like a crushing hammer.

Suddenly he realized that Sykes was struggling with Natalie. He started out from the niche where he had hidden. Then she broke away from the big cowboy and started up the trail.

Sykes gave a rough laugh and attempted to kiss Natalie. Ted suspected that he was not quite sober. His blood boiled, but he forced himself to keep still as she sped lightly up toward him.

"Stand still or I'll shoot!"

It was almost unbelievable. Ted came out from the misery of considering his own plight to see the danger in which she was from the wild impulse of her admirer. He was sure that Sykes did not know what he was about, and the terror of what he might do almost petrified him for an instant.

In that moment Natalie turned and faced the man who was coming rapidly toward her.

"You should be ashamed, you coward!" she cried, though the danger could not have been unnoticed by her.

For Sykes was actually flourishing his pistol as he ran.

"You think I'm goin' to let that thar rich skunk git ye! But I ain't. I'm goin' to kiss ye to-night, an' to-morreh I'm goin' to tell the boys that we're goin' to be married. It's got to be thataway soze ye kin jes' git ust to it!"

The liquor Sykes had drunk before he started out with Gill on his night-trip had been assisted in its work by frequent drafts as he waited alone. Natalie's words and her hidden but intense wish to find out all he knew that might clear Radford had worked upon him till the smoldering fire in him burst into flame as she extended her hand to say good night. He had utterly lost the gentle chivalry that had always marked his manner to her.

She listened breathlessly to him, not daring to turn and run lest he put his threat into execution. Without knowing just what was wrong, she felt that he was beside himself and was afraid to try any of the little arts that usually soothed him to almost servile obedience.

"I've got ye now, ye little witch!" he exclaimed, rushing on toward her in a savage exultation that turned her sick and cold.

Suddenly she was lifted off her feet. Sykes had lost sight of her for one instant, the instant for which Radford waited. A big rock stood up in the very way of the trail. Behind it, low so that he could look across it to where Natalie trembled, there was a place where the trail would naturally have gone—but it was made almost impassable by the sharp points of small rocks that bristled up. The trail, therefore, swept about the rock; and, in that second of freedom from the hot scrutiny of Sykes's wild eyes, Natalie disappeared. Sykes came on around the rock. He did not see her, and redoubled his speed on up the trail, believing that she had fled toward the house.

Without a word, his hand still over her mouth so that she would make no betraying sound, Ted fairly dragged Natalie back among the dark crevices. At any moment Sykes might discover that she had not rushed ahead and return to look for her. Certainly when he reached the plateau of rock in front of the house which she could not have crossed and gained the door in time to avoid being seen by him, he would know that she had hid somewhere in the fissures.

"He'll come back. Be still!" Radford said, then took his hand from before Natalie's mouth.

Together they crouched in the shadows. They heard Sykes coming back, more slowly as if he had recovered from the wildness that possessed him a while before.

"Miss Natalie! Oh, Miss Natalie!" he called softly as he moved slowly down.

It was plain he had become his normal self. Natalie started to go, but Radford's hand fell on her shoulder and pressed her back in her place.

"He's doing it just to coax you where he can get at you!" Ted whispered, so white-hot with anger and jealousy that he could have torn Sykes limb from limb and enjoyed it.

It was a strange trick of fate that sent together the two Sykes would have given his own life or taken Radford's to keep apart. It was the quintessence of retribution for his madness that he should himself be the means of crowding Natalie's trembling little body close to Radford's in the narrow crevice where they hid.

"Miss Natalie, I beg youah pahdon! I lost my head like a fool! Please come hyah. I cain't go off an' leave you out hyah alone."

"He's all right now—I better go," Natalie whispered.

Radford's hand, warm and strong, had fallen from Natalie's shoulder and had slid around her. In that indescribable, half frightened ecstasy with which a girl obeys the man she loves, she sank back against the rock.

"Good night, Miss Natalie," Sykes called, and went off down the trail, thinking that she meant not to forgive him for his outburst and wisely deciding that silence and his departure were best.

But Radford was not ready to release the little lady whom some fate, more tender than most of what had been dealt him lately, had given him. He held her till the sound of Sykes's footsteps had ceased and the thud of his horse's feet came up from below.

Then he turned to her. It was almost more than he could do to break the charmed silence in which they leaned there. But he must make her understand that he had not done the awful thing with which he was blamed.

"Mlle. le Fevre," he began, feeling that he must let her hear him and recognize the truth of what he said before he would dare call her by her name or

let his longing hands touch hers again, "I know no more about the death of Nick Bullen than you do. Indeed, I didn't know he was dead till I heard it up there at the house."

"Dr. Stratton wrote that—"

"I can't help what Midge wrote. In the first place, I had no motive."

"You wanted the money. You were all broken."

Radford's gloom suddenly lifted. The quaint little accent twisting the slang to elegance was too much for him. He reached for the little figure in the gloom beside him and drew it close against him, lifting the small feet quite off of the rock.

"Oh, don't—don't, *monsieur!* You mus' not!"

"Natalie, kiss *monsieur!*" he ordered.

"*Non!*" she protested, struggling in his clasp.

"Listen, little one: If I were guilty of the crime you think—"

"Oh, I cannot theenk! But I mus' believe what is said by—"

"By me," Ted interrupted. "Natalie, believe me! Believe me, darling! Believe me, I love you more than I love anything that earth holds or heaven could offer! Believe me, my beloved little one—because I love you!"

"Oh, *monsieur,* eet ees not reason; but—I do!"

The small hands, clinging, eager, trembling, fluttered about his face. They touched his eyes like butterflies. Ted, in a rapture at the sudden richness of her love-language, scarcely breathed. He shivered as the light touch of her finger-tips threaded his temples and shot, warm and soft, into his hair.

"*Monsieur! Monsieur! Monsieur!*" she breathed, as if words, however futile, must add their expression to the telling of the love that possessed her.

Radford's quick sense of humor responded for one second to the exquisite absurdity of her calling him *monsieur.* But the next moment his eyes were wet. She was believing in him because she loved him.

And how she loved! No flower ever quivered and swung and breathed and bloomed in the warmth of the sun as she trembled and flushed and lifted her face till her sweet breath fanned him.

Something in the miracle of her generous abandonment to love, the sweet deep frankness of her acknowledgment suddenly calmed the growing importunity of his blood. He could have thrown himself at her feet and worshiped her for the faith she had in him. It stirred every fine response of which his nature was capable.

It made him determine not to take what she gave so splendidly till he had relieved her mind so that no sorrow or shame could blight the joy in her heart. He set her gently down against the rock.

"Natalie, my darling—" His voice died under the stress of his deep feeling.

"I am leestining!" she whispered, the spell of his mood upon her.

"I will not kiss you till you know—till it is proved that you can give yourself to me without one regret."

If there was in Natalie le Fevre one little doubt of him, one tiny fear that she might not wholly love him, it was killed then. He fought down his craving for her till he could claim her without the stigma that would hurt her pride as long as it were not proven false.

"*Monsieur,* I love and honor you." She said it with the stately little manner she could assume at times; and Ted bent over the small hand raised to him and kissed it.

"You go now?" she asked as she turned away.

"Yes; but I'll come back," he said, and both of them throbbed to the promise in the words.

He watched her till she showed like a dusky little ghost against the dim light that was burning in the house. Then he turned and went toward the trail to the spring.

The exaltation of his meeting with Natalie was pushed from him by a very practical consideration. He had

five dollars of the money he had brought West. He had about forty coming to him in wages. And he was under the cloud of suspicion which must be removed at any cost. He had to have money.

He reached the shelf above the spring. Looking out from that point, he could discern the dark figures of the cattle, a slow-moving herder on his pony, then several nearer figures which he suspected were cowboys wrapped in blankets and sleeping soundly. He made his way down.

"Who's that?" a sleepy voice demanded.

"Radford," he replied, going toward the bulk that lifted slowly from the saddle-pillow and blanket-bed. "Say, Red, you heard Silsby speak of the Cochinino Mine. Where is it?"

"Shut up!" Red replied, disgusted at being waked for no more pressing reason than to converse on mines.

"I won't!" Radford returned with a fierceness that had its effect. "I am going to know where that mine is if I have to shoot you to find out."

"Lord! Pretty, you—"

"Where is it?" Ted persisted, drumming systematically on the foreman's ribs.

"Quit that! You knock the wind outa me! It's 'bout fifty miles west uv the fur side of the Mesquite Range. Leastways, thar's where it wuz when it wuz a mine," Red answered, more agreeable as he waked more completely.

"What do you know about it? Gill's just tried to put a hole in me because he thinks I've got a deed to an interest in it."

"That's funny!" Red exclaimed, thoroughly aroused by the mention of the owner of the Double X and his strange doings. "All I know is, 'twas 'bout the biggest frost to three men that ever come a kitin' from the horny hand uv fate!"

Radford had no chance to try his hand at interpreting Red's unwonted oratory. Some one rose in the darkness beyond and began to growl. It was Silsby himself.

"Ye kin take it from me that the Cochinino ain't sech a frost. That big bonanza's right next to it—the Bonita. Las' time I seen Al Watson out yander he wuz so excited he wuz jes' 'bout dippy. He wanted me to put up some money to git hold uv the old Cochinino claim."

"When was that?" Ted began to feel the excitement heat his blood.

If he had the deed, as he suspected, and if the Cochinino should prove to be of value, it would enable him to set about proving himself worthy of Natalie le Fevre's love.

"Lemme see! 'Twas 'leven years ago this—"

Ted did not listen. Eleven years ago was before things began for him. It did not occur to him that the events in which he had been so disastrously involved could have had their inception at so distant a period.

"Where's this Al Watson?" he asked.

He recalled the picture Natalie had shown him. She had pointed out her uncle, and they both recognized the figure of Nick Bullen. The third must have been Al Watson.

Radford remembered him as a rough-looking customer in high boots, flannel shirt, a shaggy beard, and an expression of discomfort as if he felt he did not appear to advantage with the dapper Frenchman and Nick Bullen in his best clothes. Locating this Al Watson might be the surest route to learning all about the Cochinino Mine.

"Search me," Silsby replied. "I heerd somethin' 'bout him gittin' in a shootin' scrape. Guess he done the killin'. Mebbe he went to the pen fur all I know."

"Look here, Silsby," Radford began, leaning toward the ranchman so that he could see his face, "what would you say if I told you I had a deed to an interest in the Cochinino Mine?"

Silsby looked sharply at his new puncher.

"So, that's why ye give up yer bath-tub an' yer vallay an' come out here!" was his reply.

"No, it isn't," Ted corrected. "I came out here because I wanted to look around and see if I hadn't sense enough to earn my own living."

"I reckon ye won't ever have to go hongry!" Red muttered in a way that made the words sound like praise.

"But I've got to have more than a living. I've got to have money. If this Cochinino Mine's worth anything, and I've got the deed I think I have, I ought to be able to get enough out of it to—to—"

Radford paused. It was not easy to acknowledge himself suspected of murder.

"To whut?" Red asked, curious because of the solemnity of Radford's manner.

"To fight the suspicion of having murdered a man."

Red whistled.

Silsby shifted his legs and straightened his back. "Whut's that?" he asked sharply.

"I just found out to-night that I'm supposed to have killed Nick Bullen," Ted replied.

To his amazement, Silsby leaped to his feet and came toward him with extended hand.

"Put her there!" he cried in such an extraordinary burst of feeling that Big Red sat up and stared.

He gripped Ted's hand and wrung it till the bones cracked. Ted could only grunt and wonder.

"It's the best job ye ever did! He was the scum uv the earth; an' he done me dirt! Ye jes' ask Ward Silsby fur anything ye want! I can't never pay ye fur givin' him whut wuz comin' to him. Wisht I could 'a' done it; but —well, I'm glad it's done!"

Silsby was pumping Radford's hand up and down in an excitement that seemed not to exhaust itself with the effort.

Radford listened to his unwonted flow of speech with rising indignation. He realized that Silsby had reason to hate Bullen; but he was not pleased to have the credit he was getting for having rid the earth of a rascal.

"Hold on there!" he shouted finally, dragging his hand from the iron clutch of the ranchman. "I didn't kill him. I didn't even know he was dead till I heard that I was blamed with putting him out of the way. What I want is to find out about that Cochinino Mine and get hold of some money to clear myself of this suspicion."

Radford was shouting. He seemed to need force to wake Silsby out of the obsession that he was congratulating Bullen's murderer.

The ranchman looked dazed for a second, disappointed for a minute more, then gave his attention to Radford as he explained his sudden flight from New York on the night of the murder.

Silsby listened. Then he burst out with the information that lifted Ted's hope to a pinnacle. Bullen had sold his share in the Cochinino to some Eastern chap. It was probably Radford's father.

"There's sure some value to the Cochinino now, or Bullen wouldn't 'a' tried to git it. Ef he's dead and Al Watson ain't above ground, the whole blamed thing'll belong to you!"

Radford's exultation caught a sudden jolt. Bullen might not be dead. But he thought of Natalie's positive assertions of Stratton's information. It seemed to prove that the Westerner was dead.

He told Silsby of the complication, that Bullen seemed to be corresponding and telegraphing to Gill when Dr. Stratton, Natalie le Fevre, and Alice Thorpe asserted that he was murdered on the morning of the day he left New York.

"Great gophers! that's some mystery!" Red exclaimed.

Suddenly Radford leaped to his feet.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "It's Al Watson doing it in Bullen's name. I don't know why; but he does, probably. I've got to find him."

Neither Silsby nor Red knew of any better explanation for the peculiar fact.

"Say, Radford, ye jes' hike as fast as yer hoss kin leg it an' see whut's in yer trunk. Ef it's that thar deed, I'll go with ye prospectin' 'round whar the Cochinino's located. Take my hoss."

Radford accepted the offer of the big black.

Red and Silsby shouted advice about "humpin'" himself to the ranch-house.

Four days later Silsby rode over to satisfy his curiosity. Frederick Radford had never reached the Mesquite Ranch.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MESQUITERS IN ACTION.

Silsby raced around the ranch-house like a madman. He kept telling the men they did not know what they were talking about. Radford had come to the Mesquite four days before.

Gradually the truth impressed itself on him that all of the punchers about the place knew Radford well enough to be certain they had not seen him. Silsby asked which shack he had occupied since he came to the ranch. He was directed to one at the greatest distance from the house.

He hurried to it and pushed open the door. The lock on the frame barrier banged and clapped. It had been torn loose when some one had delivered a vigorous kick just under it.

The ranchman gave one quick glance about the shack and dived at the trunk under the bunk. It opened to his hand. Its lock was broken, too. The clothes inside were tossed about. He sought through and under them. There was not a paper or an envelope.

The envelope containing what might be a deed to the Cochinino Mine was gone. Silsby looked at the broken trunk-lock. He stepped back to the door and examined the lock on it.

Near them both were the marks of boot-nails. The story they told him was that some one in a desperate rush had kicked open the two obstacles between him and the deed.

Naturally, it could not have been Radford himself. He would have had the keys. Then where was Radford? How had the thief known where the envelope was?

What he saw and what he could not understand convinced Silsby of one thing. The deed to the Cochinino was not waste paper. Some one who knew was after it. The old mine had revealed riches lately, or some one who had been prospecting there suspected it would make a showing that justified robbery and any other crime which would secure possession of one of the three original deeds to the claim.

Silsby felt his heart pounding against his ribs. He was a prospector by nature, a ranchman by the deliberate and wise choice which calmly defied the wild impulsion in him which prompted him to seek hidden treasure.

But now the old desires leaped into red-hot life. He liked Radford. Something about him had won and held the interest of the ranchman.

With the promise of riches, the yellow wonder lurking in the dark and hidden crevices of deep-sunk rocks, Silsby's excitement fanned to white heat. He set himself the task of finding the young man to whom the wealth might belong and of being one to discover whether the old Cochinino had really given up the treasure that she had been suspected of hiding.

There is in every man the fine ability to lose himself in the cause or the ambition of another. Life had been chopped off with the same cruel blows that a vandal sends into the splendid body of a powerful tree; Silsby himself was the tree.

Curious impulses, which he felt but made no effort to analyze, urged his interest and warmed his heart toward Ted Radford and his cause. Perhaps the sudden blinding realization that his own child was a boy who might have

grown to a manhood as strong in body and finely open in character as Radford, stirred him, too.

At any rate, he strode out of Ted's shack determined to call his punchers together and give chase to whoever had taken the deed or captured its rightful owner.

He ran to the porch of the ranch-house. He picked up a big conch-shell that was rarely disturbed from its place on the broad sill of the window. Standing out from under the small roof that sheltered the front door, he blew.

Punchers sitting on the corral fence —why they chose a perch of such inconceivable discomfort they could never have told—almost fell off. The next moment they leaped from the height of the top board and ran like prairie-dogs.

From their hooks on the fence-posts, from the sides of the stables, from all the places where they hung, the punchers seized the galvanized buckets. In two minutes there was a rapidly moving line of men beside the big windmill. As each bucket was filled the puncher who held it turned and ran at top speed, with careful concern for his water supply, toward the ranch-house.

Still the conch breathed its menacing roar over the plateau. The boys looked to see the first puff of smoke which would tell them that the ranch-house was afire. But none rose.

The first punchers reached the porch. But Silsby did not stop blowing. The hoarse sound of the shell bellowed on till the men not yet arrived at the spot thought the ranch-house must be in the most immediate danger.

Another and another and another, with bucket slopping water, rushed up, grabbed the bottom of the bucket to be ready for a command to empty it in the most effective spot, then stood, like a big image in browns and bronze, staring at the madly blowing ranchman.

Still Silsby blew. The boys from all over the place came tearing. There were fifty amazed men gazing at the boss and suspecting his sanity when he finally lowered the shell from his lips.

He glanced over them with practised eye.

"Say, boys, somebuddy's bin robbin' Radford, an' he's disappeared. I don't know whether he's bin made way with ur whut. But we've got to find out. Listen here!"

The punchers crowded closer, unmindful of the tipping buckets that were wetting high-heeled boots.

"Him an' Tom Sykes has both got a crush on that thar niece uv Frenchy's. Sykes has been a tryin' to git him. T'other night Gill himself come into his room when he was a layin' sick at the Stone House an' held a gun 'g'inst his heart. Ef Mlle. le Fevre hadn't 'a' got the drop on him, he'd 'a' finished him. Ef Gill's goin' to butt in an' he'p Sykes in his courtin', it's up to me to look after the interests uv Radford, ain't it?"

A prolonged roar of agreement voiced the sentiments of the Mesquite punchers. The enmity of years was behind their acquiescence. All the small quarrels of the range and the saloons influenced them to become advocates of Ted Radford's cause.

"Who's the gal favorin'?" some one shouted.

"Search me!" Silsby replied, seeing that he had stirred in his men the enthusiasm which would enlist them in the search for Ted.

"We could carry her off, keerful like, an' find out," another suggested.

"Say, lookee here!" Silsby exclaimed, seeing that enthusiasm might take spurts into directions for which he could not be responsible. "Whut's the good uv findin' out 'bout how the gal feels ef we ain't got Radford? I tell ye they've got him!"

"Who? The Double X-ers?" the boys yelled.

"He started back here four days ago an' he ain't got here yit! I jes' went to his shack an' seen the door busted

open and his trunk busted open. Some one's done somethin' to him besides robbed him, I tell ye! We've got to find him fust!"

In twenty minutes over forty men rode in four directions from the Mesquite ranch-house. The ten left in charge were barely enough to keep things going and were bitterly rebelling against being left.

Silsby sent them in the directions he thought best. It was more than probable that the sortie would be reported at once to the Double X-ers, and war was likely to break out with a fury it had not had a chance to work off for several years.

The ranchman himself set off on his fastest horse for the Stone House. He believed that Sykes might have dropped a hint that would be a clue to Radford's disappearance. In his own mind he was convinced that Gill was turning to account Sykes's infatuation for Mlle. le Fevre and using the young man as a spy on Ted while he was sick in the Stone House and as a means by which he might secure the deed which he wanted.

Behind Gill there was some one else. If Nick Bullen was dead it was some one who had a knowledge of the possibilities of the Cichinino. He recalled Radford's saying that Al Watson must be the instigator of the effort to locate the deed to the mine, since Frenchy was certainly dead and the proof of Bullen's demise was so certain that he was blamed with having made way with him.

Suddenly, however, Silsby had another and what seemed to him a better explanation of the plot that swung around Radford and the deed. Gill was the whole thing in it. He had learned of Frenchy's death; he knew that Bullen was dead and that the suspicion of being concerned in his taking off centered on Radford. He was making a try for the deed on his own account.

Faith in this explanation of events grew in Silsby's mind as he rode toward the Stone House. Perhaps Bullen had gone East to try to secure the deed in possession of the Radfords.

But he had communicated his intention before he went to Gill. Probably Gill himself had managed to get rid of him. It would leave him a clear field for his efforts to become possessor of the Cochinino.

Silsby knew that the original papers were made out in the names of the three men. He knew that an agreement with a purchaser of any one of the three parts might be put into writing and attached to the original deed, and it would be a valid claim on a third of the property.

It occurred to him that he might hunt up the records and see if a transfer of any one of the three interests had been recorded. He would wire from Piñon after he had visited the Stone House and learned all he could.

Reaching there and communicating what he knew about Radford, he learned just one thing—that Natalie le Fevre loved Radford.

"M. Radford—deed not reech—the Mesquite Ranch?" she whispered disjointedly, after she had listened to him with her great eyes wide and the color receding from her face.

"Nope. None uv the boys seen—"

Natalie crumpled up and sank to the floor as softly as a little worn-out leaf relinquishes its hold on the limb, where it has clung hoping for summer's return, and falls to the ground.

Alice and Silsby picked her up and laid her on the bed that Radford had lately occupied, and which had not yet been moved from the big living-room.

"Oh, I wish we'd never heard of Frederick Radford!" Alice exclaimed miserably as she worked over Natalie.

With an attention to detail which Ted had not shown, simply because he did not know the neatness with which incriminating evidence had fitted itself about him, Alice poured out the story of her connection with the Bullen case and her belief in Radford's guilt.

"He'd 'a' bin servin' his kind ef he

hed kilt Bullen! All that worries me is that mebbe he ain't dead!" the ranchman growled.

Alice looked at him for a startled instant. He was a conscienceless creature outside the pale of her understanding; but she proceeded to convince him that Dr. Stratton had seen and known enough of his own patient to be able to identify him when he saw him dead.

"Well, ef they found him dead—him ur any other man—right next to the front porch, why in thunder didn't they git busy ketchin' the murderer?" he demanded, as if what he uttered was a kind of proof that even a man with a gun could not exterminate the incarnate devil, Nick Bullen, and certainly no short fall and shallow pool, even with Ted Radford to help, could drown him."

"Maybe some day you'll realize how these rich folks can shut up what they don't want known!" Alice retorted. "He's engaged to a rich and beautiful girl that's in the newspapers every other Sunday. His mother's the leader in a certain fashionable set. Naturally they're not crazy about having it known that disgrace and wickedness is right in their midst! You can't blame them! That poor dumb man—"

"Dumb man? Who's he?"

"Nick Bullen. The one who was killed."

"'Twasn't Nick Bullen ef he wuz dumb. Nick Bullen could talk the paint off uv a wooden Indian an' the blanket off a sure one! I guess I know how he could talk, dern him!" Silsby asserted, all the wrong he had suffered from Bullen pushing to expression in his hard voice.

"He'd been hurt. Dr. Stratton said he had had some awful blow that paralyzed his tongue," she explained.

"By heck, he needed it!" Silsby exulted.

Alice looked at him again. He was irredeemably in league with anything or anybody who had helped to give Nick Bullen any hurt. She turned to her little patient, determined to let the barbarian beside her go his own Godforsaken way.

That way appeared to lead directly to Piñon. But Natalie was less willing to let him be off. As he started to go she struggled up from the pillow.

"M. Seelsby, eet ees Tom Sykes who has hurt him! He may be lying dead among the rocks! M. Seelsby, you—you weel find him?"

Silsby turned suddenly and recrossed the room. He grabbed the trembling hands reached toward him imploringly. He shook them till the little form on the bed trembled more.

"You bet I'll find him—ef I have to go to hell to do it!"

The intense expression served its purpose. Natalie sank back, sobbing. Something in her had let go; and the awful horror and despair of a moment before which had stricken her was dissipated by a gleam of hope.

"You do not theenk he is dead, *monsieur?*" she asked—almost pleaded that his answer be "No."

Silsby stood looking down into her face for a while, almost forgetting her in his concentration on the thought her question had wakened.

"They won't kill him till they git his written agreement to—that thar deed. 'Twon't be much good 'less they'se somethin' to show that he turned over his share. Ye see, he's got a mother; an' this hyah deed come to him through his father so his mother'd be his heir. Ef he wuz dead she'd git it. They won't be a killin' him jes' to hurry up her a gittin' hold of the Cochinino."

"But they—they might force him to sign—to save hees life!" Natalie cried, repossessed by fear.

Silsby was silent. He knew Gill would stop at nothing if there was great gain in it.

"But, *monsieur,* eef they force heem, they know that we—"

She buried her head in the pillow. But Silsby and Alice caught sight of the anguished horror that convulsed her face before it was hidden.

"What is it, Natalie?" Alice cried, dropping on her knees and flinging an arm over the little girl as if trying to protect her from some catastrophe.

"They know M. Seelsby has seen the broken locks! They know we know he was threatened with death here! They would know that even eef he signed he could prove that eet was forced, that they had won the signature through torture! They know he would set about to prove that the moment he was free! O-h, they weel nevaire let heem go! They dare not! They weel keel heem; and we weel nevaire know what had really happened to heem! He weel be hidden in these awful rocks somewhere—somewhere — somewhere — I can nevaire find heem! I can nevaire find heem!"

Natalie's voice had risen with the same flaming energy that sends a fire leaping to the pinnacle of a tower. Every word seemed to burn with more vivid horror. Silsby felt the chill prickle of terror run over him.

Alice Thorpe, for once utterly unlike her competent, cool-headed self, stood beside the bed with the water she had brought for Natalie in a tin cup shifting in spray toward the floor as her hand trembled.

Both of them saw with the clearness of Natalie's vision the same picture that had lent her words their force; they saw Ted Radford's body lying in some crevice of the rocks, hidden from all but the sight of minds as intensely moved as theirs was under the spell of the little lady's word-painting.

"It's the truth!" Silsby finally muttered. "They'll git him, an' they'll never dare let him get away! Onless—"

Even Alice, disliking Radford as she did, looked up into Silsby's face, seeking for some slight hint on which to fix one bit of hope. Natalie gazed at him with the wild longing of the despairing.

"Onless—he kin escape! He's got the nerve and the wits!"

"But he ees weak! He has been ill! How can he get away from them? They weel watch heem every second!" Natalie cried.

Silsby was silent. A conviction had been growing upon him that they were face to face with conditions which came from deeper sources and were the results of more complicated plots than they knew.

If Gill or Watson had managed to make way with Bullen and to fix the guilt of his death on Radford, from whom they wanted to secure the deed for which Bullen had been searching, it was impossible to guess the intricacies with which they had worked up to the climax of Bullen's death. It was equally impossible to guess what they would do with Radford.

Certainly one fact stood out of all the confusion. The Cochinino Mine was valuable. It was worth killing and doing every other kind of dirty work just to get possession of a third interest in it.

For almost twenty years its value had been overlooked. At least, so it seemed to Silsby. Now, with murder and mystery too deep for him to read, the old claim had reasserted its right to attention.

"What weel you do, M. Seelsby?" Natalie asked, bringing the ranch-owner out of the troubled whirl of his own thoughts to face the need of quick action.

"Gosh, if I know! I told the boys that's out huntin' to bring the fust news they got ur the fust Double X-er they caught right hyah. I'll be round hyah to take keer uv whatever comes up! Ef I could git hold uv Gill hisse'f—"

"Can't you with all your men?" Natalie exclaimed.

"I'll try. Red's got enuff spleen in him to enjoy gittin' a holt uv Gill ur Sykes. He'll gobble a chanct to git even on them thar steers."

Without further parley Silsby went out of the big room and down the trail to the spring. In ten minutes he had

told Red all that had happened and had given him the privilege of making the capture of Gill his chief object in life.

He rode toward Piñon on a fresh horse. Vague as his ideas were about what to do to serve Radford best, he concentrated on the one thing that might be of practical value. He would get into Piñon and wire the registry where the Cochinino claim was recorded for the information of any new records made there.

It was more than likely that the record of the transfer of Bullen's share to Ted's father had never been set on the files. From what Radford had told him of the supposedly worthless paper, his father had simply kept the deed, expecting that the property might increase in value.

When he discovered that it did not, he had probably taken no more interest in it. So Silsby had little hope of light from that source.

His confidence was really in his boys and what they might discover. They might round-up some of the Double X men and worm something from them. They might run across the place where Radford had been taken if captured. There were a sufficient number of things that might happen to keep Silsby from complete discouragement, but nothing on which he counted enough to feel really encouraged.

Whether Ted Radford had killed Nick Bullen or not, he cared little. Whoever had done it deserved his gratitude rather than his disapproval. Silsby had positive and summary notions of justice.

He rode into Piñon and toward the frame building that enjoyed the telegraph-office and the distinctions thereto appertaining. It was railway station as well, of course, and hotel upstairs for the trainmen. But he wanted to reach only the part of it which housed the telegrapher and his instrument.

But it was not so easy. Piñon was moving in a body toward his own destination. Cowboys on their ponies were crowding each other. The board sidewalks on either hand were thronged with the storekeepers and their help, with the few women of the town, some of them in strange, high-colored costumes; even the missionary preacher and his invalid wife. They were all bound for the station.

Silsby could claim the privileges of wealth. He was the richest cow-man in that part of the world. He shoved his big black through the crowd.

A circus had once visited Piñon and called out such a procession as this. But he had not happened to see it. He rarely came to town. So he was completely at a loss to account for the excitement.

As he emerged ahead of the population he saw what made him almost gasp in sheer amazement. On a siding where nothing more elegant than a day-coach discarded from some better road had ever disputed the rights of the humble box car, there stood an object on which the very sun itself glanced and slid off in surprise at its elegant brass and glass and paint.

It was a private car.

From a window facing the approaching crowd a woman the like of whom Silsby had never seen gazed out into the yellow sunshine with eyes as blue as the sky that held the sunshine in its deep, inverted bowl. Without knowing what it did, Silsby let the big black take its own way.

With his own eyes fixed on hers, he was borne ahead by the black till he was close to the car, and came to himself with an embarrassing realization of his rudeness. The blue eyes were Ted Radford's set in a woman's head.

She was beckoning to him. The next moment she was gone from the window, and the next after that she was at the back of the car, leaning out of the vestibule of plate glass and shining wood and brass. Still she beckoned; and there was nothing for Silsby to do but put his horse alongside and go back the length of the car to her.

"Do you know Mr. Radford—Mr. Ted Radford?" she asked.

"Yessum," Silsby replied.

"Will you find him for me?" she requested, smiling from the blue depths of her eyes with the smile that always won what she wanted.

"Wisht I could," Silsby replied.

"But—I think you can," she said. "I'm his mother."

Of course, Silsby had to believe it. But he dodged telling the truth. He could tell it to a man or perhaps to another kind of a woman. But the lady who leaned against the brass rail and gazed down to him looked as if every unpleasant communication should be passed her through a hedge of roses—and roses were not plentiful at Piñon.

"I'll try, ma'am," he said.

He turned his horse and galloped wildly away just as Midge Stratton came to the door of the car.

CHAPTER XX.

NATALIE ON THE TRAIL.

It took Midge Stratton just the time required to hire a horse and ride out to the Stone House to find out why Silsby had dashed away from Mrs. Barrington's question with the look on his face which had stimulated Stratton's energies.

He had come on the trip with a reluctance due to his peculiar position. He was madly in love with Bess Hetherington.

She was sacrificing herself to her fear of her own inability to live without money, to her mother's ambition, and to the need for not awakening in Mrs. Barrington the curiosity that might enlighten her about Ted.

Stratton, Bess, and Barrington were all three united by a kind of protective league which had for its object the keeping of her son's crime from Mrs. Barrington.

Love for his wife had impelled Barrington to his extravagant provision for Bess if she married Ted. Bess suspected that he was buying her silence. If she was once Ted's wife, her lips must be forever sealed and guarded closely. It would be to her interest to keep Mrs. Barrington ignorant.

Bess and Midge had talked with wondering admiration of the unselfish devotion, the adoration of Barrington for his wife. Neither of them could underestimate it. Love had grown in them till anything that might be done for love seemed possible. Bess had wild dreams of running away with him—which she never told. He had dizzy hopes that rose as high as winning her—which he never told.

With the insight which is of soul, Midge valued the meaning of money at what it stood for to Bess. He did not look down on her or quarrel with her for her acquiescence to the marriage.

He knew as well as she that if she broke the engagement, after Mr. Barrington's profuse generosity had become known, it would entail explanations that might result in exposing Ted.

But when Ted's telegram came he had felt as if nothing but his own powerful hands choking the life out his boyhood friend would ease the rage he felt at the insult he had offered Bess.

Bess took it more calmly. There were tears in her wonderful eyes, and tears, too, in her low voice when she interrupted his raging with: "If he loves some one? We didn't know, he and I, what love was! Now, if he has found out—"

Midge had crossed the room—she had come to him at his office with the telegram—and grasped her hands in his.

"You're sacrificing yourself — for his sake! To keep his mother from suspecting him, you were doing—"

Bess interrupted him.

"I'm selling myself and my silence—for millions."

"Oh—confound it all!"

Midge had flung himself, all his big weight of bone and muscle, across the room in two steps. He stood with his back to her on the far side, fighting with the almost overwhelming longing that possessed him to take her in his arms and hold her against the world.

"Do the Barringtons know about this?" he asked after he had gained some control of himself.

"Yes, I was there. So mother sent the telegram out to me. I opened it in the drawing-room. Of course they saw something was wrong. Mr. Barrington asked if it was from Ted. I didn't answer, but I handed it to him. I've never seen a man in such a rage—except you just now, Midge. He went perfectly white. Mrs. Barrington noticed of course. So he had to tell her what it was."

"She—did she—"

"Midge, she had no chance to think of anything but her husband. He spun around on his heel and walked out of the room as if he had no intention of ever speaking to either of us again. It really frightened her. She went after him, and I did not see her again before I left an hour later."

Stratton, wrung by the love that had taken hold on him, came back to Bess. He took her in his arms. Without a word to acknowledge it, each of them knew the other's love.

"Bess, if this is—if it comes out that Ted did have something to do with Bullen's death—if it's no use for you to sacrifice yourself for his mother's sake, can't you give up—the money?" he asked hoarsely.

"Mrs. Barrington, sir."

The announcement came from beyond the screen which separated Midge's inner office where he examined his patients from the outer private office. It meant that Mrs. Barrington waited outside in his general reception-room.

Bess seized her jingling gold trinkets so that they could not rattle. She slipped from his arms and toward the door by which his patients could leave without going into the reception-room.

"Bess, you haven't answered me," he whispered, catching hold of the tassel on the sash that wound about her waist and hips.

She stopped because of the danger to her gown. He plainly meant to hang on till he had an answer.

"It would make mother wretched," she answered.

"Good Heavens, we do nothing but think of somebody's mother! We've got our own lives to—"

"I'm coming in, Midge. I must see you at once."

Bess closed the door behind her just as Mrs. Barrington came around the screen.

"My dear boy, I can't be frightened any more, so you needn't glare at me," she protested when Stratton faced her, scowling. "Hugo—Hugo's gone. He was perfectly lovely to me, as he always is; but I could see that he was in a perfect rage with Ted. He's done such an awful thing! So utterly ungrateful and so rude—to Hugo and to Bess. I'm going to see him, and you must come with me."

The interview found Stratton pledged to accompany Mrs. Barrington West in order to bring Ted to a realizing sense of his misdemeanor. Her heart was set upon the marriage.

She excused Ted a bit with saying that Bess was cold and had probably offended him in her letters, so that he had imagined some one else who happened to be more cordial was really the object of his affections.

But she could not get over her son's callous rejection of the wonderful prospect which Hugo Barrington's generosity had opened up to him. It looked to her as if the lives of two remarkably handsome and fortunate young people could flow along a way so perfectly smoothed and so luxuriously decorated that nothing short of sunstroke could have put the wild notion into her son's head to reject the promised joy.

She wanted to see Ted and talk him into a more sane state of mind. The state of heart to which his telegram gave testimony seemed to her like a confession of a momentary emotional aberration which would be dispelled by reminding him that Bess Hetherington was the loveliest girl in New York.

Stratton was literally forced into the trip. Gradually his wrath at the condition of things was growing. He wanted to see Ted. He wanted to make him defend himself against the charge which none of them dared to speak.

He wanted to be sure that he really did not love Bess, and he believed if Ted actually was the criminal that he appeared to be enough of the old fineness of nature and the generosity of heart which had characterized him as a boy would survive to make him want to clear up the unhappiness he had caused.

Without a warning of his coming he entered the Stone House. Alice Thorpe started as if she had seen a ghost, then ran to him as she received a rescuer. Events were too disconcerting for her. Natalie was too complex for her understanding. Big Dr. Stratton looked like home and common sense, which quality she considered had deserted her small friend.

Stratton had realized that he and Mrs. Barrington were literally running away with the private car. She had taken advantage of her husband's absence on business to make the trip. She amused herself on the way West, sending telegrams which were to assure him that she would straighten Ted out in a hurry and that she loved him.

But the big doctor had been in the living-room scarcely five minutes when he knew something that might utterly spoil the plans that Mrs. Barrington had made.

Without a word of greeting Natalie le Fevre had seized his arm and demanded to know whether he had actually seen Nick Bullen dead. His reply that he positively had seemed to rob her suddenly of a fire and vivid beauty which had astounded him at first glance.

But the change in her after he had spoken astounded him more — for a moment. Then he understood.

"Where is Radford?" he had asked.

The girl's hands had gone to her breast. Her eyes had closed. A look of white suffering came around her mouth.

"We do not know. They — have heem!" she answered.

Stratton knew what she felt. A little later he had the facts of Radford's sudden disappearance. He learned that they believed he had been captured for the sake of the deed.

And Natalie, with the fear in her eyes that haunted her constantly, told him that she was afraid Tom Sykes might seize any chance that came to him to get rid of Radford.

It was Natalie le Fevre whom Radford loved. Stratton saw that. But in his own confused mind he wondered if some intimation had not reached Ted of the suspicion that centered on him and had caused him just to drop out of sight of those who knew his whereabouts.

"Did you tell Radford that his connection with Bullen's death was known?" he asked quickly.

Alice nodded; but Natalie drew herself up to full height and came close to Stratton, gazing straight in his eyes with her own flaming eyes.

"Eef that Neeck Bullen ees dead, eet ees another who has keelled heem! Eet ees not Frederick Radford!" she exclaimed.

"Did he tell you he had nothing to do with it?" Stratton asked.

"He's been making love to her, Dr. Stratton. He's made her believe—"

"Be still, you!" Natalie commanded. "I weell leestin to no other word against heem. He weell prove he ees not guilty. He weell—if he ees alive."

Again the fear that haunted her settled down over Natalie, quenching the brave light in her eyes, the faith with which she defended Radford. But her belief in him was not changed. Only the awful foreboding of which she could not rid herself again took hold of her and seemed to sap her very life.

Stratton went back to town and told Mrs. Barrington that Ted had gone out to some ranch miles beyond the Mesquite and word could not reach him of her being there for several days at least.

Three days passed, four, and none of Silsby's scouting punchers found a trace of Radford. Natalie sent for Silsby and demanded that he take her, with a chosen number of men, over to the Gill ranch to force some confession from the owner about the whereabouts of Radford.

"'Tain't no use trying to git him right among his own men. He wouldn't tell a thing," Silsby objected.

"Something — something must be done!" she cried desperately.

Her impatience was greater than Mrs. Barrington's, but not more disturbing to Stratton. Mrs. Barrington, used all her life to the quick action of trained servants, telephones, motor-cars, and other speedy means at the service of the rich, fumed and fretted at Ted's non-appearance.

Stratton dared not tell her that the belief that her son had met death by violence was gradually becoming conviction among the men who knew of his disappearance.

She would at once begin to telegraph for detectives, for local officers, setting in motion all the machinery to discover the criminal, to end with finding out that her son himself was an object of suspicion and liable to suffer at the hands of the law.

Only telling her how closely Ted was connected with the death of Nick Bullen would stop her activity about finding him or his body and the ones to blame for his disappearance. This Stratton could not bring himself to do, so he sedulously guarded her from all information.

She knew of his visits to the Stone House and wanted to relieve the monotony of waiting by an exchange of civilities. But Natalie absolutely refused to accept the invitation.

She knew how intent upon the marriage of her son and Miss Hethering-ton Mrs. Barrington was. Her pride rebelled against her accepting any attentions from a woman who would not extend them if she guessed that she was the girl to whom Ted referred in the telegram to Bess.

Driven by the innate force of the desire in her, Silsby had consented against his better judgment to go to the Double X. He started from the Stone House toward the spring.

But a cry stopped him. A tall, young fellow had just come up the trail from the other side of the butte. Natalie had seen him. With the little scream she had darted across the rocks and seized the big fellow.

For a moment Silsby interpreted her eagerness and the dark bulk of the newcomer as it rose against the sky to mean that Radford had come. But he saw his mistake a moment later.

"Where have you been all these days?" Natalie demanded.

"I—I didn't come over bec'us' I—"

It was Sykes. What he would have said was of no moment to Natalie. She shook him.

"Where ees M. Radford?" she cried.

"I ain't seen him sence—"

Sykes stopped; he discovered Silsby watching and listening.

"Sence when?" Silsby asked, to regret it a moment later.

"None uv yer business!" Sykes responded with the habitual discourtesy which the Double X-ers and the Mesquiters kept for each other.

He had recognized the big ranch-owner before he spoke. He appeared to find a peculiar satisfaction in venting a good deal of scorn in his words.

"Come to the house," Natalie invited, alert to learn whatever he might know and sure she could draw it from him with more ease when the seduction of a fight with a Mesquiter was removed.

Silsby tramped off along the trail as Sykes turned with visible reluctance to follow his dominant little guide.

"Since when have you not seen M. Radford?" Natalie asked, with a sweetness that covered depths of guile.

"Gee, I wisht you hedn't seen him sence I have!" he exclaimed.

"Maybe I haven't," she said archly, creating hopes she meant to turn to use.

"I was mighty much ashamed uv the way I acted. I wanted to come an' say so, but I couldn't seem to find no time an'—an' I wuz afeerd you wouldn't let me speak to ye," Sykes confessed awkwardly but with great sincerity.

"But I do, you see," she replied.

He had not answered her question, and something in the openness of his manner and his concentration on her made her feel that he had no especial reason to be cautious in regard to Radford.

"You ask about M. Radford. You do not know he ees gone—*non?*"

"Gone where?" Sykes asked baldly, because he was surprised and relieved.

"Oh, quite away!" Natalie replied with a wave of her small hands and a shrug of her shoulders that was a perfect expression of indifference.

"You told him 'twas no use a stayin'?" Sykes asked, bending to look into her face.

"I say—he might as well go," she answered, while her heart shrieked with the longing that lived in it—the longing to know where he was, to know what had happened to him.

"Say, Natalie, does—does that mean they'se a chanct fur me?" he asked, his somber eyes fixed on hers with a light that almost burned.

"You are glad that M. Radford is gone?" she evaded, giving him the impression that she half enjoyed the evidence of his jealousy.

"Glad? Gosh! I should say. I'm glad he's gone, an' I hope he'll keep a goin' as fast as I hed him runnin' when I seen him last!"

Sykes burst out in a big laugh. Natalie's little fingers clenched in the folds of her thin gown till she tore holes. But she kept her face calm and looked up at him with eyes that were merely curious.

"I seen him a startin' toward the Mesquite that night I—when I made a fool uv myself. I wuz crazy, an' I jes' tuk after him. Ef I'd a hed a hoss as fresh as hizzen I'd a ketched him sure."

"You chased him to the Mesquite Ranch that night?" Natalie asked breathlessly.

"Yep! It's a good thing he's got out ur I'd a giv' him his!" he exclaimed fiercely.

"What did he do? Where did he go?" she questioned, hoping to get some clue from the words of the man who was enjoying his triumph.

"He ran like a good un. They wuz a movin' a big bunch uv cattle thar, jes' gittin' 'em to the corrals soze I could ride right in after Radford without no one a noticin'. I went purt' nigh to his shack after him. Ye oughto seen the way he hopped off an' busted the door down an' run inside. Bet he crawled under the bed! He must 'a' bin scared I wuz going to shoot him! Scared silly! He kicked that old lock off with one whack!"

Natalie was too much amazed to speak. Radford himself had broken the lock, which had made Silsby think the cabin had been robbed. He must then have broken the trunk open. She tried to think why he should have done it.

"Deed you see heem again?" she asked.

"Didn't I though. I seen him come a sneakin' out an' grab holt uv his hoss. Ef I hedn't a bin right in the midst uv

the Mesquite bunch, an' all by my lonesome, I'd a tuk after him again as he went off west."

"West? He went off west! West!" Natalie kept saying over in her own mind.

It was certain Tom Sykes knew nothing more of Radford than that he had ridden off west. If Gill knew anything he had not told the companion of his efforts to secure the deed.

Ted had broken the locks himself. In the noise and the night when the cattle were being driven into the corrals, none of the Mesquiters had seen him any more than they had seen the Double X-er.

And Ted had ridden west. Had he secured the paper from his trunk and made off with it? And where had he gone? Why had she not heard from him if he were safe and well?

He could not be well. That explained his silence. The wild ride with Skyes—who rode like a centaur when he was calm, and like a devil when he was angry—in pursuit, had exhausted him after his illness.

He might have fallen from his horse off there among the rocks and crevices. His strained leg might have given way as he rode; and he might have pitched to the bottom of some deep fissure. He might be lying there now, dead of starvation and exposure.

Natalie had fought against every feeling that tried to show itself in her face. She had tried with all the energy of her keen mind and the body to win from Sykes word of Radford. Now she had it. But it was little comfort.

And, as if it had but waited to rise and assert itself at a moment when she was weak and full of fear, that doubt that Dr. Stratton had voiced came uppermost in her mind. Radford had run away from the danger of being caught as an accessory to Nick Bullen's death.

She gasped suddenly and tottered. Sykes's arm went out and about her.

"Whut's the matter?" he asked quickly.

She forced a laugh and exclaimed, making every atom of power she could summon contribute to the effect of her words: "Eeet ees so fonny to theenk how you scare M. Radford!"

Sykes, delighted with her appreciation of his achievement, laughed loudly. His exultant amusement produced the strangest effect. It angered Natalie to the very ends of her toes.

"You laugh, perhaps, too soon! Maybe eet ees on you ees the joke!"

Sykes stopped in the very midst of his roar. He stared at her with his mouth still open.

"Perhaps M. Radford ride fas' theenking you go for the paper! He keek the door down an' get eet an' ride away off under your very nose!" she exclaimed.

"Paper? Whut? You mean he hes got that deed Gill wants?" he asked with sudden roughness.

"I—I say—perhaps!" Natalie replied with a shrug.

She saw what she had done; she tried to smooth it over. But Sykes was on the alert.

"He hes got it! I knew it, somehow! But I let you make me believe—confound it, I told Gill for sure he didn't hev it! I might 'a' made a cool thousand ef ye hadn't made me think—"

"But I just play! I only say that because you act so smart! I—"

But it was useless for her to deny what she had virtually confessed. Without a word to her Sykes ran toward the trail. She heard him stumbling down it. Then the clatter of his horse's hoofs as it started off on a gallop came to her.

The very ones she had supposed were holding Radford or had done for him had not even known where he was. But now she had started them on a trail they would not forsake till it led to Radford and the deed.

West! West! He had ridden west. He had the deed with him, if it had been as he thought, in the trunk. Sykes would ride to the Double X and tell

Gill. They would start out on a hunt for Ted.

Instantly as she thought it she leaped toward the house. In two minutes she was out again, dressed in flannel shirt and riding skirt. She flew down the trail toward the spring.

Silsby and Red jumped toward her as she ran. Her every step told of some important news.

"Come! Saddle at once! A horse for me! We ride west. The Double X-ers weel be starting in two hours! But we—we have the start! Come!"

The two men waited for no explanations. Her manner was enough to show that speedy action was essential. They did as she ordered, and the three of them flew out on a gallop across the plains and into the foot-hills.

Ted Radford had ridden west; and they rode west, too.

CHAPTER XXI.

HUNTING THE HILLS.

As the horses struck the gait they could keep for hours at a time, Silsby looked at Natalie riding close to his side on a big horse whose length of limb and staying qualities had recommended him rather than the ease of his gait.

She was almost breathless, but her face shone in the light of the setting sun like a jewel. She poured out her story, and the two men listened with intent ears while they kept a keen watch-out over to the south where the Double X-ers would make their appearance if they came at all within seeing distance.

"West" covered a good deal of space, but Natalie had scarcely finished before Silsby gave a definite aim to their going.

"Bet he thought that thar Sykes wuz some one after the deed! That's why he never stopped to use his keys. An' now he's gone on to the Cochinino."

"How far ees that?" Natalie asked.

"It's a little over fifty miles west of the Mesquite. We'll ride thar an' git fresh hosses an' some grub. Come on! We kin run the wind out uv these hosses an' have some new ones fur the rest uv the trip."

Natalie urged her big horse into his longest gallop with the same fire that animated the men. She had grown used to the saddle, but the pony she rode was like a rocking-chair compared to the wild, rushing plunge of this big horse.

What breath she had left she caught and held in her throat from sheer terror. But she clung to the saddle and let the beast sweep on. Every long leap was so much time gained on the Double X-ers. If it was so easy for Silsby to guess where Radford had gone, she recognized that it would be as likely to come into the mind of Gill, who knew the country equally.

They reached the Mesquite Ranch, and Red grew eloquent trying to persuade the little lady to relinquish the rest of what might prove a very hard journey. In fifteen minutes from the time they reached the house they were mounting again, and Red was still urging Natalie not to come.

"I weel!" she said finally.

"Confound ye, then, come along; but it'll be yer own fault ef we have to go slow fur ye an' lose the time we're makin'! It may mean jes' eggszackly the difference between bein' a live ur a dead man to yer beau!"

Red did not mince matters when his anger and his common sense got together on a proposition. Natalie's black hair was streaming over her shoulders; her white face shone like a pearly wedge between its cleft tide. She twisted in the saddle and called to the punchers gathered about them.

"I'm going to go; but I weel not detain M. Seelsby an' Beeg Red. Weel you come with me?" she cried.

The punchers started to whoop out a cordial consent. But Big Red waited no longer for what might happen. He took Natalie at her word before

even she, mercurial as she was, could change it. He gave a yell that made his horse leap forward, and Silsby took the signal and dashed after him.

Natalie watched them with quivering lips. The punchers stood about, not quite sure what the occasion demanded.

"I shall go!" she cried, turning her face so that the moon shone down upon falling tears and a little mouth trying hard to hold steady.

"So'll we, by gosh!" the punchers cried, moved by her tears and by their own love of excitement.

Rushing on toward the cañons, Silsby and Red looked back and saw Natalie at the head of her body-guard following.

"The boys'll take keer uv her. They kin feed her at the shacks on the ranges ef she's fool 'nuf to keep a comin'," Silsby observed, settling again in his saddle and giving himself up to one aim, to cover ground in the direction of the Cochinino with the best speed and the greatest care of his mount.

The first thirty miles was comparatively easy. Red and Silsby made it without any severe strain on their horses, and in splendid time. But when they reached the mountains they began a tedious journey that irked them unbearably. While they were certain of their advantage over the Double X-ers, who must come from the ranch itself, they had no means of knowing what plans had been laid by which communication with others interested in the deed might be made.

If Sykes had ridden to the ranch, told Gill that Radford did have the deed, and was probably on his way to investigate the Cochinino Mine, it was possible that word had been sent into Piñon, fifteen miles from the Double X ranch-house, and telegrams forwarded that could go by a roundabout route to a town within eight miles of the mine.

It was only reasonable to suppose that the one behind Gill in the effort to secure the deed, or Gill alone if he were the real instigator of the movement, had posted an assistant where he might be needed, at the town where any one seeking information about the mine would be certain to come. Any one except Ted Radford!

If this person got word from Gill that the bearer of the deed was approaching the mine by another route, it would be the first thing he would think of to send some one to prevent his ever reaching the mine, and especially to relieve him of the deed.

Big Red and Silsby talked grimly of the chances of being ready to rescue Radford as they toiled through the cañons, traveled along ledges that overlooked depths too great to be considered. Even thinking of them made men sick and weak.

Silsby's ranges ran up into these mountains. He knew them in their more accessible parts; but the way by which they journeyed to the Cochinino was one he had gone but once, and that so many years before that he was not certain of it.

They had to leave their horses, trusting that they would find their way back to the ranch. As they went on they began to think that Radford, without a supply of food, unfamiliar with the range-shacks where he might have gotten some, and but just recovered from the strained leg, had little chance of ever reaching his destination alive.

They had climbed for a day when suddenly a horse came whinnying from beside a stream-bed they were approaching. They both recognized the horse; the brand on its left hind leg simply told them what they already knew. This was the horse Ted had ridden.

Clearly Ted had managed to ride much farther than they. If he could have spoken to them at that moment it would have been to say that "his luck" was with him in finding an easier route which they had gone a bit too far to the north to enjoy.

But all trace of him was lost. They

searched the rocks about. They called, thinking he might be lying hidden in some crevice, weak from the strain he had put on the game leg, and hungry. But they got no answer.

It seemed utterly beyond the bounds of reason to believe that he could have gone on to the mine. Silsby believed it should be less than ten miles, perhaps nearer, even; but his knowledge of the place was not possessed by Radford. He might have given up and started back to more familiar country.

"Jumping June-bugs!" Big Red muttered as the thought occurred to him. "He'll most likely run head-on into that confounded passel uv Double X-ers ef they've tuk after him!"

"We've sure got into a devil of a place!" Silsby observed, gazing about at the steeps and deeps of the mountains. "Seems like they ain't much use a huntin' fur him in this infernal mess that nachur mought 'a' knowed better'n to kick up!"

"Come on. Les' leg it to the mine anyhow! We kin find out whut's whut thar even ef we cain't find Radford," Red said, shoving the nose of Ted's horse from him.

The animal tried desperately to follow them. It appeared to have a fear of the loneliness of the place, yet it showed no disposition to leave the spot where Ted had deserted it.

Silsby knew the horse. It had been trained by the puncher who rode it before Radford acquired the use of it to stand for hours where it had been left. But he knew, too, that if it were still alone when night fell it would assume command of the situation and make for the corral.

As the ranchman recalled this, he knew that Radford must have been with his horse during the night, so that whatever had happened to him had occurred within the day that was just drawing to a close.

He turned the horse's head down the mountain and gave it a sharp cut with his whip which made it leap forward in resentment and surprise. When it recovered its wits and paused to look back, he yelled and whooped and flung stones at it till it turned and fled out of sight along the route of the stream.

"You've done it now!" Red exclaimed. "S'pozzen Radford comes back hyah a limpin' an' a needin' that hoss worse'n ye need store-teeth, whut d'ye reckon he'll do?"

"Radford won't come back ur he'd a bin hyah. He knowed that thar hoss wouldn't 'a' stayed after dark," Silsby replied.

It grew very dark. Finally they gave up trying to make their way ahead. The moon would rise later; and they laid down to sleep till they might have the advantage of its light.

Silsby went off almost instantly, and Red was just about following when he heard sounds that were distinctly different from the mountain noises to which his ears had become accustomed. Something or some one was coming toward where they lay in the trail.

Red drew his two guns from his belt and prodded Silsby awake with one of them. The ranchman was alert instantly. He, too, heard the steps of whatever it was that neared them.

They both listened. The footsteps of an unknown person coming in the middle of the night may or may not be fearful; but, when the vast unlighted spaces of a cloud-covered sky smothers down over gaunt promontories and gaping abysses into which a disturbing dream might send one rolling to death, the approach of some creature or being unknown has a peculiar terror which the strongest men feel.

Silsby and Red hunched as close to the cliff as possible. The trail here was somewhat generous in its width. The thing that was coming might pass and never touch them. That is, if it were something ungifted with the exquisite sense of smell which the midnight gloom has no power to deceive.

Silsby felt Red's hand press down on his arm. He leaned close while his foreman whispered: "It's a human bein', ain't it?"

The horror of listening had gotten on Red's nerves so that he felt he must have an opinion on what he had tried to solve for himself and could not.

Silsby made no reply. It seemed to him, as the sounds came nearer, that there were too many of them for a man to make. Four feet it would surely take to produce the noise they heard.

But he could think of no four-footed thing that would move with such an amount of racket. The velvet paws of mountain lions or the soft pad of a bear's feet never could have made the noise to which he gave such an attentive ear.

Suddenly Red put an end to the suspense. The creature or whatever it was would be on them in a few minutes, and he proposed to get an idea of what to expect. As he opened his mouth and yelled "Hi, there!" a second thought darted into his mind and he responded to it.

"Radford, is that you?" he called.

The sounds ceased. It seemed to Silsby that they might have been made by Radford if his leg had gone back on him and he was making his way over the trail with the aid of a stick. But there was no answer.

"Holy smoke! That's funny!" Red muttered after they had waited for a reply till the great awful silence of the night grew so oppressive they felt as if something sat heavily on their lungs.

It was not funny, and Red did not mean it literally. It was hideous. It was maddening. To sit there on that narrow ledge, with eternity yawning just beyond your boot-heels and infinity gulping at you from above, waiting for an answer you did not get from a thing you could not see, was a strain on the nerves that made a straight-out leap into the abyss to get it over seem a kind of relieving change to contemplate.

"You confounded fool, why don't you talk?" Red suddenly demanded, and the wild echoes wranged and yapped at and with his words till he could have choked himself for speaking.

And still that mysterious thing that had climbed the mountain path toward them gave back neither speech, nor howl, nor roar, nor sound of moving in its place. It seemed to have frozen in the silence and space of the heights.

Red twisted as if he meant to rise and go along the trail.

"Lay down, ye eedjit! Ye have to git shoved off into the gulch ur shot ur—"

It was not easy what to predict as the probable end of the man who rashly put himself between something he could not see and the edge of the trail. Red sank back in his place and continued to stretch his ears till they ached for some sound that would give a hint of what or who might be their neighbor on the trail.

But none came. One hour lengthened into two. The pale sheen from the moon began to silver the thick black moss that hung from the sky. Gradually the two men could see that they were just the usual kind of clouds. The light was brighter.

Then the peaks of the mountains silvered and the moon sailed out from among the veils she had worn as she rose. White, wonderful, revealing, she shed her light. But look as they would along the trail from whence the unexplained sounds had come, they could see nothing that might have made them.

Sheer rock fronts, without a cranny in which a beast or bird or man might hide, rose at the right of the trail as far as they could see. And at the left the edge of the narrow way shone with bald and suggestive cruelty. Nothing could hide or cling or cringe along it without being hurled into the cañon below.

"Well, I be lassoed and larruped!" Red exclaimed, too completely nonplused at what they had heard and at what they did not see to speak extensively.

"Come on. Le's git along! This

hyah's the right trail to the Cochinino. We'd ought to uv hit it 'fore we did; but I wuz kind uv out uv my bearin's," Silsby said, moving forward with his pistols in his hands, ready for anything that might happen or appear.

They hurried on through the moonlit and impressive panorama; but neither of them saw its wonderful beauty. They were busy watching every shadow at first, and when nothing showed up and nothing happened they still kept a sharp lookout for the first signs which would tell them they were approaching their destination.

It was almost morning when Silsby paused suddenly and listened. Red stopped, too; then he began to peer and crane his neck about, as if he sought something. The cold glory of the moon had gone. The chill gray of the between-light was taking on the rose and gold of the sunrise; but the throbbing, as if the gigantic heart of the mountains had suddenly become agitated, was not of nature's making. They were listening to the engines of the great bonanza, the Bonita Mine.

Silsby's face was a study. In it were blended a kind of reverent wonder and fear.

"Ain't it wonderful?" he exclaimed at last. "When I wuz hyah las' they wuz jes' a hole in the ground an' two men with pickaxes!"

Ted's horse had been trained on the Western ranges. When he dashed away from the Mesquite with the envelope he had taken from his trunk stowed safely in the bosom of his flannel shirt he had let the horse have its way.

He knew just one thing—the Cochinino claim was west some fifty miles, and he was going to it. He remembered what Silsby had told him. It seemed the sanest thing for him to do was to find out what the deed he might have in the envelope was worth before he went any farther in the work of clearing his good name. For he must have money. If the deed would bring it to him he wanted to know it and make the most of it.

For a while he galloped on without a pause, because he had still the idea that the individual who had pursued him from the neighborhood of the Apache Spring was really after the deed. He would not give up the chase just at the time when he stood the best chance to secure his object.

But he found he was not pursued. Stopping his horse, he drew out the papers from the envelope. There were only two. One was a deed to a third interest in the Cochinino claim and in the name of Nicholas Bullen; the other was a written statement of the transfer of ownership to Frederick Alan Radford, Sr., and the price paid for the property.

Ted could have shouted in his exultation. Now, when he found out what the Cochinino was worth, he would be in a position of independence of his mother, of Barrington, and free to set about erasing the stain from his honor which made him unworthy even to think of Natalie le Fevre.

However, he did think of her. He anticipated the time when he could go to her and tell her that no one could attach the slightest stigma to his name. He calmly overlooked Bess and what she might mean in his future. The future was—Natalie. She was all he wanted, and he meant to have her if he had to seize the four corners of the universe and toss humanity about to do it.

He would not marry a girl he did not love if all the codes in creation said he should, and he would marry the girl he did love if the world, the flesh, and the devil formed a league and forbade him.

His horse took him straight as the crow flies to the fartherest one of the ranch-shacks. Radford gratefully appropriated the bacon and flour and coffee, with matches and a tin cup, which would be necessary for his trip.

Again the beast served him better than he could have served himself by

turning, when he insisted on its keeping headed west instead of retracing its way to the ranch-house, toward the place where access to the mountains was easiest.

But Ted had thought he must leave the horse before he needed to have done so. He had moved slowly forward, because the leg forbade any rough treatment. The horse had returned for three nights to the ranch-shack, and had finally spent a day climbing to the place where he was found by Silsby and Red.

But Ted had clambered on. He had worked over the same trail they took. Then his impatience had gotten the better of him, and he had taken a less-traveled route, but one that seemed to him to lead more directly west.

In consequence he had lost time, exhausted his food, and, stumbling by lucky accident back into the way he should have gone, he had reached the place where Silsby and Red now stood just an hour before them.

The noise of the machinery reverberating through the mountains had been his guide. He was forcing his tired body forward toward it, when suddenly he heard his name shouted from behind him.

Without thinking, he whirled about and answered. The next few minutes were consumed by him in watching the hurried approach of two men along the trail behind him.

As the first one came up with him he discovered that he was a stranger. He looked on to the second. He, too, was unknown. Then he realized that, though he had never seen either of them before, they knew his name.

It was an unfortunate admission. He knew he should have remembered that he was an individual more or less in demand by some one or some ones whom he did not know definitely. But it was too late to correct the mistake, and he waited for what was to come.

When it did come it almost took his breath.

"I'm Sheriff Munn. I arrest you, Frederick Radford, fur killin' ur bein' party to the killin' of Nicholas Bullen!"

Ted was hungry. His leg hurt. But in that instant of utter surprise he forgot everything but the fact that he was being formally arrested, and for a crime he did not commit.

It was so overwhelmingly surprising because he had made up his mind to expect pretty hard things so long as he had the deed to the Cochinino about him and was intent upon discovering its worth. But here was this new development suddenly coming and shutting him away from the accomplishment of his purpose.

He had no money to fight the accusations. He would have to send word, the hideous news that he was suspected of a despicable crime, back East to his mother and nearly kill her with the threat of disgrace. He would, after all, have to be dependent on Barrington, for he must have funds to establish his innocence.

It was so completely disheartening that he turned with absolute obedience and followed the sheriff, while the deputy closed in behind and followed him.

Instead of approaching the great Bonita Mine, in whose neighborhood lay the claim which was to have helped him to break through the web of circumstantial evidence which implicated him, he was dragging miserably forward, a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXII.

GUNPLAY.

THE punchers reached the shack where Radford and Silsby and Red had provisioned. There was not enough flour or meal or bacon for the continuance of the trip if more than three of them went on.

The fact that they were indulging a lovely little lady's strong-headedness had percolated into more than one of them. They labored and strained in

their efforts to argue her out of going forward.

But they might as well have held a debate with the wild west wind or sought to lure the soaring buzzards from their stately flight. Natalie just would go.

"Go back! All of you eef you weel! I go on! I go!"

There was no place left for protest, argument, or coaxing after that. She turned her back on them and stared hungrily at the great silent mountains.

Love laughs at locksmiths, every one knows; but the love in this little lady's heart laughed impudently into the very face of the mystery and the colossal might of that heaven-piercing range.

"Some uv us—two, I reckon—has got to go with her. We cain't turn her loose in them mountains" one of the punchers said worriedly.

"Reckon I'm the one!" Fritz Sorg said slowly. "I know dem mountains de most."

Sorg was a combination of miner and puncher well mixed with Dutch. His fitness for the expedition was obvious. Even if the other boys did not dissect the thought, they had it—that the phlegmatic Dutchman had the temperament, as well as the knowledge, to guide and restrain the mercurial little creature who kept them guessing most of the time.

"You fur one, Sorg. An', fur the love uv Mike, don't let her play hopscotch on the ragged edge uv none uv them chasms. Silsby'll fire us all ef she busts herse'f ur anything!" the first speaker observed.

"I'll go with Sorg."

A grim young giant stepped out beside the stocky Dutchman. The two of them made one of those limited fraternities which form in the mountains and on the range. Stephens was ten years Sorg's junior; but they were pals in the very best of what the word means.

Natalie turned like a flower with black wings. She actually looked like that lovely impossibility. Her face bloomed with the iridescent happiness which could make her features radiant, so warm and gay and bewitchingly sweet that perfumed and brightly colored blossoms rose instantly on the canvas of the mind and surrounded her like a frame. Her loose black hair had grown to be the favorite toy of the wind. It spread and wrapped and tossed it lightly as a lover's hand would have played with its dark wealth.

"A-h!" she cried, then stood with her hands pressed against her breast, her slender body leaned lightly forward, her whole being expanding before the more or less astounded men.

"You are so good!" she went on after that subtly filled pause. "With all the love I do not geeve to heem" —she waved her hands toward the mountains, and the boys understood— "I love you!"

"Gosh, we won't git much!"

The red rushed up above the turned-back collar of her flannel shirt and into the cheeks of the girl. But her eyes laughed.

"Even a leetle ees bettaire than— not any!" she called as she climbed into the saddle.

Out ahead she rushed toward the mountains. The men gathered up the needed supplies and followed her. By night the three of them were going slowly along the trail by the stream.

They found Silsby's horse, and farther on Red's. They left their own and went ahead on foot. Sorg emptied the bag of oats he had brought. He put the grain in little bowls in the rock and laid a slender line of it away from each tasty store, so that the horses would come upon it now and then when the scarce herbage along the rocky stream-bed grew monotonous.

He feared that they might need the horses badly and proposed to use a little guile to keep them where they could be of service. No ranchman would have hobbled them in a place

so rough that all four legs in action were needed to save them from falling.

With the briefest pauses for food and rest, Natalie urged the men forward. Stephens would have worn the soles from his boots and the skin from his body attempting time-saving cross-cuts and speed-making spurts. But Sorg plodded on in the trail and was there to lead when the side-tracked and weary explorers returned to the right route and his wise guidance.

A crisp, pale-gold morning was biting their bodies with its exhilarating chill and filling lungs and eyes with the miracle-working air and light when Natalie rounded a big, triangular rock and stopped suddenly.

Just beyond it she saw two men. They were talking, their backs toward her, as they gazed down the trail, which dipped suddenly beyond the rock. She was struck by the familiarity of one of them especially, while there was about the figure of the other something that she thought she had noticed in some one she had seen before. It was the strength of the somewhat heavy figure that she had seen and noticed.

The taller man turned so that she could see his profile. It was Gill of the Double X. Instantly every fiber of her was alive, every power of thought awake. Gill had not been heard of in the neighborhood of the Stone House since his night visit to Radford. He had probably been here in the mountains, and instinct told her that his presence meant trouble for Ted.

She backed away from her point of observation, then sped lightly and noiselessly along the trail till she saw Sorg and Stephens coming. With uplifted hand she warned them to stop. They did, before the noise of their approach could have reached the two men beyond the big rock.

Going on toward them she warned her companions not to make a sound in their journey to the place in the trail where they could see the strangers. She wanted them to look at the shorter man and tell her if he was one whom she might have seen among the punchers of the two ranches.

But neither Sorg nor Stephens knew the man. Natalie peeped again and again, bothered by the certainty that she had seen him—had seen the breadth of those heavy shoulders and the slight sag in the left one which the flannel shirt revealed.

The fact that the man was in conversation with Gill at that lonely place in a trail that led to the Cochinino claim was enough to make her failure to place his figure where it belonged in her mental gallery very irritating.

Then he, too, turned so she could see his face a bit. A heavy beard that ran high on either side of his face reassured her and reexcited her. She had seen him before. She knew she had. But where?

If she could have stolen nearer so that she could hear distinctly what they said she might have gained some hint of his identity or learned something of the reason for the conference with Gill and whether it did really concern the man who had come to be her one great interest.

But a fly could hardly have crossed the bare face of the bald rock without being seen. She dared not make a move forward as long as the two stood there in the trail. Gill would know her instantly. He would guess that she had come either hunting for Radford or carrying him some message.

If it was for him that the two men were seeking they would not let her get away so long as they believed she knew the whereabouts of Frederick Radford.

She glanced about, trying to locate a hiding-place for herself and the two men if the stranger and Gill started on up the trail in her direction. But it was a hopeless task. Sheer, smooth, sternly unadaptable to her need, the rock towered up from the trail, and equally sheer, smooth, and horrible it fell away to abysmal depths below.

While she watched and wondered what she should do if they turned, whether she and the men would have time to run back along the trail before they reached the turn about the great rock, they both shifted their positions and stared directly up toward her.

Gill must have seen her dodge back. At least, some sudden change in the edge of the rock's sharp contour puzzled him.

"He's up thar!" he exclaimed.

He started forward. The other man spoke under his breath, without moving hand or foot.

"Stand still, you fool! Do you want him shooting us down? We're easy marks right here."

He had scarcely spoken when a bullet kicked up a spatter of rock chips within two feet of where he stood.

"See that! He knows we've seen him. Lord, he's got us for fair!"

The two men stood there in the trail. A movement forward was certain to woo the attention of the pistol. They both knew that the shot had been sent by an individual who simply chose not to hit for the time being; it was a warning.

Both, too, knew that Radford was probably desperately set on winning through to the Cochinino to find out what his deed was really worth. Gill had tried to rob him, and he would suspect instantly on seeing him now that he was still bent upon securing the paper.

They stood there, deadlocked.

A second bullet dug into the stone three inches nearer Gill and right in front of him. He jumped back. A third came, and it struck the spot where he had stood a moment before. He sprang back again. A fourth whacked at the rock where his footstep was not cold. And again he plunged backward.

The fifth bullet, striking accurately in the place he had just left, told him in silent language what was expected. He turned and ran like a rabbit down the trail. The bullets began their sinister sign language for the benefit of the other man, who had stood in the trail with a courage that commanded admiration but stirred no sympathy in Natalie's breast.

She had told her companions that Gill of the Double X was out on the trail.

"Scare heem back! Shoot near hees feet! Make heem run!" she whispered tensely to Stephens.

That grim-faced young man snuggled close to the rock. He peered through the cleft between two sharp points. And, with a nicety of aim that thrilled Natalie like fine music, he obeyed her.

The solemn sport of shooting Gill along the trail appealed to his sense of humor, and he played his part in the farce-tragedy with consummate skill and rare enjoyment.

It evened up a lot of unpaid scores held by the Mesquite against the Double X, and Stephens knew that he was making history for himself as he shot.

But that still figure that did not dance to the music of the bullets absorbed the attention of the Dutchman. It promised trouble, and he watched it as he crouched on his knees on the trail and held his gun ready.

The long-headed Dutchman found his unfaith in the still man justified suddenly. Stephens had just sped a bullet at Gill's footsteps and sent him careening down the trail, when the still man lifted his hand, grabbed his gun from his belt, and, with incredible quickness, aimed at the place where he had finally located the sharp-shooter who pursued the feet of his companion.

The next instant his gun flew from his hand, discharging in the air. It was just the second between a life and death for Stephens, and he sank away from his peep-cleft, white and fierce-eyed.

A howl that was a curious mingling of pain and rage sounded almost simultaneously with the gun's report. The

weapon hit the trail and bounded off into the chasm.

"Move on! Step lively!" rang down the trail in a woman's voice.

The man, who knew the futility of disobedience, paused just for a perceptible instant as he heard the words. Natalie almost laughed aloud. There was something delightfully funny to her in the contrast between the surroundings and those in which the words she had used had gained their immortality.

Thousands of miles stretched between her and the New York subway; but the guards who hounded the passengers with their admonition never used it more frequently or to more advantage than Natalie now employed it.

If the two men ahead showed signs of lagging she called it. If a suspicion that they contemplated revolt came, she hurled it at them. With her two companions marching with guns aimed, she nagged and urged and bullied Gill and the stranger.

It must have been maddening to her victims. Neither of them dared look back. A bullet warned them. Both believed that Radford was one of the men with her. Once they essayed escape when they came to the place in the trail where they had come into it from their wanderings about in search of Radford.

If the rift in the perpendicular wall had been a sudden one, into which they might have dodged and taken their part in preventing the pursuers such uncontested privileges, it would have served them.

But a gradual, smooth-faced approach was made, which afforded them no shelter, and the ladderlike trail which they must have taken went up the face of a cliff that cornered the approach without affording a crevice in which to hide.

All day they marched ahead with the guns trained on them. All day Natalie worried to find an explanation for the stranger's familiarity. Neither of the two parties stopped to eat. Cold biscuits sustained the pursuers; but the pursued were not permitted the freedom of their pockets, even if they had anything stowed there for food.

Naturally, night was the thing hoped for by the two men who trudged grimly on. Natalie and her companions discussed what they should do. The sky had been as clear as a bell all day; but toward evening heavy thunderheads piled their mountainlike masses on the peaks of the mountains below. There would be no stars.

The moon came late and might be obscured when it did appear. The two men were becoming a burden. Natalie wanted to get on to where this rugged trail led. With the faith that removes mountains of uncertainty, doubt, and undermines the impossible till it shows its unsubstantiality, she looked forward to meeting Radford at the end of the trail.

She hoped the men would escape, if only they would not retaliate for the treatment they had received by making her own advance more difficult.

Suddenly the vast stillness, which had been broken only by the bark of the guns when the two men had seemed to need warning, was shattered into a thousand noisy echoes. A man, shouting at the top of a pair of vigorous lungs, raised the hullabaloo that the rocks turned to din.

"We've got him! We've got him!" he yelled.

Both groups on the trail stopped short. Natalie's heart leaped in her throat, her mouth became parched and dry; she scarcely breathed, while all her mind and soul seemed to concentrate on the words.

"Got who?" Gill howled with a kind of indignation that needed action for its full relief. "Got who, you eedjit? Got nothin'! Ye ain't got a lick uv sense nur nothin' else! Come howlin' up hyah that ye got somebuddy that's bin a chasin' us with guns fur a whole day! Ye make me sick!"

All of the ranchman's rebellion at the strain he had endured as the sharer

of the aims of two altogether well-managed guns sizzled and hissed and bellowed from his lips.

"Shut up!" the man beside him ordered and shouted in vain.

"Shut up? I won't! I've bin a pransin' long hyah till I feel like I'm goin' to split ef I don't git some relief! Got? What ye think ye got, ye coyote?"

The exuberant person who had rushed along the trail with the glad news passed from animation to amazed silence. He emerged into indignation, and by the time Gill had worked off his first instalment of language he was ready with an answer that righteous indignation made him yell in a voice that capped the high climax Gill had reached.

"We've got Radford, ye slobbering skunk!"

Gill's anger took another shoot upward. The thermometer of his rage boiled over again.

"I knowed ye'd say that. Of all the thunderin' fools that's knocked the pegs out uv boot-soles, ye're the champeen!"

"Whut's the matter with you?" the man who had met them asked.

"Nuthin' the matter with me. It's you. You've got 'em. An' Radford's got us!"

The informant stared his wonder. The silent man studied his face. His neck jerked as if he found it almost beyond his power of will to keep from looking back along the trail where the two men and the girl were awaiting developments.

"Radford's behind us with another man and a woman. We have come along the trail all day without daring to look back. I guess you're wrong about catching Radford."

"I guess I ain't," the other replied. "I'm Munn's depity—the sheriff."

"You've got a man you think is Radford?" the stranger asked.

"That's it."

"How do you know? Has he got the deed?" the man asked eagerly.

The deputy looked blank.

"I don't know about no deed. We ain't searched him. But he's the spittin' image uv the description that wuz wired to the sheriff when his arrest was ordered fur the killin' uv Nick Bullen," the man replied. "'Nuther thing that makes us sure is 'c'us' he turned an' answered 'fore he thought when the sheriff called his name. He's the man, all right."

The man Natalie had not known mumbled something as he spun around on his heels and stared up the trail to where Natalie and her two companions leaned against the rock. He did the thing he had longed to do, but dared not for the guns in the hands of two expert shots. He looked keenly at the two men.

But both of them were close against the cliff and, even in the golden illumination of the setting sun, which frilled the clouds with edges of fire and turned the peaks of the mountains into crests of living gold, he could not tell the height nor the figure of the two. With the woman they were massed like statues in bronze grouped close.

"Give me your gun," he said to Gill.

He put out his right hand. It was covered with blood, coagulated now where the red streams had run down his fingers.

"Ye cain't shoot!" Gill exclaimed, staring at the hand.

"It's only a flesh wound," was the quick reply.

The hand was still extended. But Gill did not give his gun to the man who had accompanied him along their peculiar journey. He glanced carefully over his shoulder at the group higher up the trail.

The durance under which they had moved all day had fitted itself like a habit on them both. The deputy noticed how carefully they refrained from facing the three up the trail until the shorter man had whirled about so suddenly and then demanded a gun.

"Say, ye kin take mine ef it's any 'commodation," he offered.

The bloody hand closed securely on the weapon. Natalie's quick eyes saw him lift it before Stephens and Sorg had taken in the situation.

"Lie die!" she cried.

As the bullet sang past they all three fell to the trail.

"I'll be—"

The man with the bloody hand had no chance to complete his exclamation.

"Ye oughter be, confound ye!" Gill exclaimed, striking the weapon down before another shot could buzz from it.

"Move on! Step lively!" rang down to them.

"Hike!" Gill said, grimly setting off along the trail.

The deputy stood amazed while Gill and his companion moved ahead obediently. But an admonitory bullet sang close to him, and he accepted the astounding inevitable and marched along with them.

Sorg and Stephens were listening to Natalie. Her voice throbbed like the beating of a cruelly wounded heart. Both men heard its strange sound even more clearly than they noted her words.

"They've caught heem! Eet ees just now else thees man would not have been so excited. He ees not lying hungry and hurt among the rocks. But he ees in the hands of hees enemies. These men we drive are not sure the other speaks true. But we know, and we must help heem."

"How?" Stephens asked.

"I do not know."

In the acknowledgment there was despair and anger at her own lack of cleverness to solve the problem.

Sorg and Stephens plodded on in silence, as if they wanted to give her freedom to think out a way they were too dull to find.

The man Natalie knew but could not place had been talking, too. The wall along the trail was broken and curved now. The sunset had died to a pale, reminiscent sheen which did not conquer the shadows.

"If I could have made those chaps jump away from the rocks by shooting them instead of flinging them down in a heap I'd have known whether Radford is ahead or behind us on this trail," he grumbled.

Five minutes later Stephens paused and bent, peering forward intently.

"Gallopin' gophers—they're gone!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST.

THE shadows of night and the greater opportunities which the trail began to offer for escape had favored the men who had marched to the urging of Stephens's gun. They had listened to the deputy's repeated assertions that the man his chief had in custody was exactly like the one described in the telegram that had ordered his arrest.

Finally, it had come to them that even if Ted Radford were one of the group of three who pursued them, they were in no position to get the upper hand of him.

Gill suggested that they roll over a break in the trail where they could slide down to the bank of a stream and make a get-away to the Bonita Mine. There, if they discovered that the man captured was not Radford, they could organize a party and search for the three on the trail before they could make an escape.

It seemed the best of a number of bad plans to the man who said little but appeared to be consulted with deference by Gill. The three of them were in a region they knew intimately now. They were gone and rushing along toward the Bonita before Stephens and Sorg discovered that they were watching shadows instead of men on the darkening trail.

They reached the stone building in which Sheriff Munn was locked with his prisoner. The man on guard had the key and admitted them without question.

"It's him!" Gill exclaimed as his eyes fell on the man sitting with his head in his hands.

Radford leaped up and faced the owner of the Double X.

"So this is some of your work, is it?" he cried in a voice that showed something of the rage that burned in him.

It all looked plain to him. Gill was still after the deed, and had somehow found out enough about him to use the suspicious circumstances of his connection with Bullen's death to get the sheriff to arrest and hold him.

But Ted lost interest to whatever response Gill might make to his accusation. He looked at the man who entered the dusky room just behind the ranch-owner. For an instant he was puzzled. Then everything cleared. He remembered the picture of the "three disgraces" that Natalie had shown him. This man was the unknown third.

"It's you at the bottom of all this!" he exclaimed, seeing the meaning of Gill's activity in the man who stood near the door.

"Well — what if it is?" the man said with a voice of gruff and throaty timbre that harmonized with his look of strength, with the heavy black beard, with the lurking shadows of the room and his dragged-down felt hat, which partly concealed his face.

"You're Al Watson! I know you! You want the deed to the Cochinino Mine!"

The man by the door took a long breath suddenly; his big chest seemed to expand under the flannel shirt. Gill cast a quick look at him, and an expression of approval with the way things were going settled on his tanned face.

"I jes' do," Watson replied.

"I guess you'll want a while longer!" Ted retorted, stirred by a curious antipathy for the man.

"Hev ye searched him?" Watson asked the sheriff.

The sheriff looked a bit surprised.

"Didn't see no use uv that! He looks so eggsacly like the wire—"

"Ye'd better do it," Watson interrupted.

Ted recognized that the sheriff thought the establishing of his identity as the murderer was the object of the search he undertook. But he watched the countenance of Gill and tried to read the shadowed face of Watson as the examination proceeded.

"He ain't even got a cigarette on him. I got his gun when I brung him in!" the sheriff exclaimed as if he were somewhat pleased by the failure to locate anything that would show he should have taken the precaution before.

Watson came forward a step, then seemed to pull himself up with a jerk. Gill ran up and began investigations on his own account.

"They ain't nuthin'—" he almost gasped when he had slapped and felt about through the limited garments of a puncher.

Nothing in the pouchy flannel shirt. Nothing in the pockets of the corduroy trousers. Nothing besides himself in the legs.

"Take off yer boots!" Watson ordered.

"Who's bossing this job?" Ted asked, unable to keep the shine from his blue eyes.

Watson seemed to read his amusement at their discomfiture. He clenched his hands as if he fought hard with a desire to take the young man by the throat and beat him against the stone wall.

"Whut ye done with it?" he shouted.

The sheriff turned and stared at him in sheer amazement at the repressed fury in the words.

"It's where you won't get it, Mr. Watson," Ted asserted positively.

For a moment Watson and Gill were silent. Ted read the pause as an admission that they had trusted to the fact that there were no banks or safe-deposits about, and had believed they

had only to get hold of him to secure the deed.

Something had come to him which made him resolve to hang to the deed, which must have an enormous value to justify the trouble they were taking to secure it, even if he did it at the risk of his life. And a brief look at Watson seemed to promise that he might be pushed to that extremity.

"I guess you'll fork it over when ye git to the swingin'-point fur killin' Bullen," Watson affirmed grimly.

"Hanging isn't fashionable in New York now. They always electrocute," Ted returned.

He could not have robbed himself of the chance to rub into the miner the fact that he had his match in the man he had arrested. The deed was still safe; and Radford made up his mind to gloat as long as he had the chance.

"It might help some ef ye wuz to show that deed—"

Watson spoke with a peculiar significance. He paused with even more significance.

"How?" Ted asked.

"Reckon it might make things some easier 'bout yer murderin' Nick," was the reply.

"I don't see how it would—if I had murdered Nick Bullen!" Radford replied.

"Mebbe I could point it out to ye," Watson observed.

The situation was tense. Even the sheriff was staring at Watson with a look that showed him surprised. He was listening to the man who had probably ordered the arrest of his prisoner spar for an opening to make terms by which he might secure a deed of which the sheriff had no information. He began to see that motives deeper, or at least different, from the unmixed desire for justice actuated one of the two men whom he had supposed were instruments of vengeance for the punishment of crime.

"Maybe you know more about the killin' of Nick Bullen than I do," Ted suddenly exclaimed.

Radford's mind was leaping from one to another of the incidents which had led up to his present predicament. Nick Bullen had supposed he had the deed his father had acquired years before. He had come to the New York house to get it. His health and his dumbness had prevented his either using force or words to secure his end.

This Al Watson had been a party to the plan. He had probably realized that, the old deed secured, he would get a larger share of the wealth of the Cochinino if Bullen were out of the way.

In some way he could not fathom, Bullen had learned of his going out to Cressymere with the envelope containing the deed still unopened in his pocket. He had followed him. He it was, probably, who had been interrupted in his effort to rob him of the deed in the night. Watson, in turn, had followed Bullen, and had pushed him over the wall or drowned him in the belief that he had secured the deed.

It all shot through his mind in lightning brightness and speed. He took a step toward Watson and stared at the drooping brim of the broad hat which covered his eyes.

"You did kill Bullen! By Jove, I see it all now! And you're accusing me of it in order to get me arrested and secure this deed to the Cochinino. Now, when you find it isn't on my person, you're offering to help me escape the punishment for your crime—for your own crime, I say!—in order to make me tell where that deed is now! No, sir, Mr. Watson! You can't do it! I understand you! I tell this officer of the law here if he lets you get away he'll be losing the real murderer, the man who did kill Nick Bullen!"

The sheriff turned puzzled eyes from one to the other. The conviction, the appearance, all of Ted's manner and looks, favored a consideration of his words. But—there was an offer of ten thousand dollars reward for the arrest of the man who killed Nick Bullen.

"I—I—say, whut hev ye got to say?" he asked uncertainly.

"I say this hyah chap's puttin' up a purty good bluff; but it won't work!" was Watson's reply, but it seemed to lack assurance for the sheriff.

"I got the wire from the police department uv New York. They wuz a reward uv ten thousand dollars offered fur the arrest—"

"You're paying a big price for your fun, Mr. Watson," Ted scoffed.

Gill was taking no part in the conversation. The deputy, who had come in with the others and stood a silent but keenly observant spectator of the scene, kept his eyes fixed on Watson with an intentness that was somewhat disconcerting to its recipient.

Ted turned to the sheriff. Rapidly, and with a telling effectiveness that momentarily reduced the officer to further depths of uncertainty about which of the two men really was the criminal, he told of the killing of Bullen as is appeared to him. Watson stood and listened. Gill shifted uneasily. The deputy did not give up his intent gazing.

As he finished the sheriff acted. Without a warning of his intention, he declared Watson under arrest as a suspicious character.

Gill fairly snorted with wrath. But a look from Watson silenced him.

"We'll settle this," Watson said. "You may arrest me; but—I warn you you'll regret it."

"All right. We'll let it go thataway! I ain't goin' to run no risks. I kin find out more 'bout this hyah business in a day ur so. Come on!"

Watson turned and followed the sheriff. Radford was left under the espionage of the deputy. The door had scarcely closed on the others when he came close to Ted.

"Say, young feller, ye're off about that bein' Al Watson. I knowed Watson. I wuz his guard at San Quentin. That ain't him."

"It's got to be Watson!" Radford exclaimed after an instant's thought. "Frenchy Phillipe and Nick Bullen and Al Watson were the ones who located the Cochinino Mine. Frenchy and Bullen are dead. It's got to be Watson."

"Whut's the Cochinino Mine?" the guard asked.

"It's around here somewhere," Ted answered, seeing that the guard was inclined to be agreeable to him and willing to encourage the acquaintance.

"Not on yer tintype! I've bin 'round hyah fur more'n six years an' they ain't a mine uv that name in the country."

Radford looked at him, and saw he spoke from knowledge and with conviction.

"You mean there's not a mine here—why, it's got to be here!" he began and interrupted himself to exclaim.

The deputy backed away a little. He even felt for the gun in his belt.

"Say, ye seem to think things hev got to be like they ain't, jes' 'c'us' ye say they are!" he observed, wondering if this strong young man were not touched in the head with the weakness that was noticeable for its absence everywhere else about him.

Radford had no time for a reply. He heard a shouting outside which sounded like music to him. It was the grand, great voice of Big Red, raised to dominate the throb and hiss of machinery.

"Whar ye at, Radford?"

Radford leaped to the grated window of the building that did duty as a storehouse when it was not distinguished by the presence of a prisoner. He yelled a welcome to Red that could be heard above all the noise.

Watson had had a brief conference with the sheriff. He had asked a chance to speak to the prisoner in the storehouse alone. The sheriff had brought him to the door and opened it when Ted's voice informed Red of his whereabouts.

In an instant the way that the sheriff seemed disposed to contest was literally beaten open by Red's big fists.

He rushed into the storehouse with the sheriff and Watson at his heels, and Gill, closely followed by another man, just behind.

"Did they git it?" Red shouted.

"Not on your life!" Ted caroled.

He looked beyond Watson and Gill and saw Silsby. His spirits mounted. His friends were with him; and it would go hard if they did not serve him. He knew the enmity between the Double X and the Mesquite was enough in itself to stir up a fight which could as likely as not end in his release. The sheriff was acting with Gill, which would make him a relished victim to the Mesquite men.

But something stronger than Ted's strong right, something more powerful than Big Red's awful fist, something that shoots more surely than even Silsby's ready gun, came silently into the storehouse that the men entered so noisily.

The sheriff went quickly to a point on the wall, and light flooded the room from half a dozen electric bulbs. Watson, preserving the air of calm which had been slightly broken in his interview with Ted, turned to see that the door was closed against an effort of the prisoner to escape.

The light shone on Ward Silsby as he pulled his hat off. Radford, the sheriff, Big Red saw Watson's hand fly to his gun. Before any of them could speak it was out. But Silsby was scarcely a fraction of a second slower.

The two men glared with intent to kill fairly leaping from every line of them to the minds of the others. Radford and Red knew that, in the moment which was to follow, one or both of them would measure his length on the storehouse floor.

The sheriff knew it. But a kind of paralysis possessed them all which could not be overcome. It seemed an hour that Silsby and Watson gazed along their gun-barrels at each other.

Then the guns spoke.

The detonation startled the watchers from their inertia. They saw Ward Silsby, straight, untouched, glaring like a figure of fate. Watson was lying on the floor.

Before they could reach the fallen man Silsby took one stride. He bent over Watson. The white light from the electrics revealed the fact that Watson still lived. He opened his eyes and looked into the eyes of the owner of the Mesquite with terror.

"I'll git to kill ye, after all, Nick Bullen!" Silsby cried, his voice high and dry and hideous with its menace.

He pressed the gun against the breast of the man he had called Bullen. Radford reached them just as the man shot made an effort to fling himself away from the gun.

He seized Silsby's wrist in a grip that all his strength of muscle and will made powerful. He dragged the gun away from its threatening position.

"Let up!" Silsby thundered. "I told ye whut Nick Bullen done to me! It's my turn now!"

The ranchman went wild. Radford called Red. Together they dragged him away from Bullen.

Radford went back when the deputy took his place holding Silsby. When he reached the side of the man who had proved to be Nick Bullen he saw that it was just about over for him.

Bullen whispered something. He bent low to hear.

"Lucile—tell Lucile I—"

Radford snatched the felt hat from Bullen's head. His hand went toward the black beard, but he paused. In the eyes, clearly seen for the first time, he found certainty.

"I—I didn't mean to kill Watson," he whispered in intervals of the gurgling of his own blood in which he was being drowned. "He got out of prison. He came to—to—hound me. He showed me—money in his—belt. He'd borrowed it—and he was going to tell how—how I'd got him convicted for murder—and how I'd stolen the Cochinino. I couldn't have—Lucile know. I drove him out—at the point

of a pistol. He climbed over the wall —and was drowned. Tell Lucile—"

The voice died away. Ted Radford, shaking as if he were in the clutch of a chill, staggered up from his crouching position beside the man who had just struggled and failed to draw another breath with which to voice his message.

"*Barrington!* Barrington is Nick Bullen!" he gasped as if, even yet, he could not comprehend the disclosure that had come.

Silsby tore loose from his captors. He dashed across the room toward the man he had shot.

"You're too late, Silsby! It's all over," Ted said.

Gradually all the truth of Nick Bullen's discovery of the wealth of the Cochinino Mine came out. He had managed to get financial assistance to develop a claim which he called the Bonita.

After he had sold his interest in the Cochinino to Radford, senior, he and Watson had run across a prospector who had discovered the lead which grew in size as it approached—the old Cochinino claim. The prospector had not yet secured his papers. Nick Bullen had killed him and fixed the blame on Al Watson, who was sent to the penitentiary.

In the fight that had accompanied his quarrel with Watson, who found him ready to appropriate the dead man's property, he had given Watson the blow which resulted in the paralysis of his tongue. He had arranged the evidence and had led the hunt which located Watson, unable to move and speechless beside the dead body of the prospector. Watson had been convicted.

Bullen, a man of superior education to his associates, went East, changed his name, organized the Bonita Mining Company, and proceeded to get fabulous wealth from the mine which was really the old Cochinino claim.

Al Watson served ten years; then, with the aid of an old associate who was willing to share the wealth he confidently expected to secure, he went East.

He had made his effort to reach Nick Bullen on the very day that he, as Hugo Barrington, was marrying the woman to whom he had first given his attention because she or her son must be in possession of one of the three deeds to the Cochinino, while he himself possessed the other two.

But Watson had failed in his effort. And Barrington, informed fully by what he saw and by what he learned from Bess, had meant to keep the evidence he could offer of Ted's having killed the dumb man as a threat to hold over the head of his wife's son if he made any move to find out about the Cochinino or to use the deed he held.

He had taken the money from the belt Watson unfastened to show him his resources. He had tossed it into the lacquer vase, thinking that when it was discovered it would merely be accounted one of the strange curios in the wonderful house he had bought completely furnished for his handsome bride.

His dying words were truthful; he had not meant to be the cause of Watson's death. But he had heard his wife coming to seek him. He had hurried Watson out at the point of his pistol and told him he would communicate with him through his office later.

Watson, knowing the desperate nature of his old companion, had fled before the gun, had bolted across the lawn, and come to the wall. Taking it for a fence over which he could climb and get beyond the range of the gun, he had fallen over, had been too weak to stand the excitement, had lost consciousness, and drowned helplessly in a few feet of water.

"You heard what he said?" Ted suddenly said as he faced the sheriff. "That he didn't intend to kill Bullen?"

"Yep, I heard."

"You? You? You?" Ted demanded of the deputy, of Silsby, of Red.

Stilled by the death which they had witnessed, they nodded.

"I guess that clears me?" Ted asked.

"I guess so. I ain't hed no orders but to arrest the man that killed Nick Bullen," the sheriff replied. "Ef he's dead—"

Silsby started. He looked quickly at Ted, then at the sheriff. Ted raised his eyebrows warningly, and Silsby kept still.

But the sheriff had been thinking.

"Say, you called this hyah man Nick Bullen," he said to Silsby.

"That don't cut no ice."

It was the deputy, who had gone to tell Gill and Barrington of the capture of Radford, who spoke.

"We all seen him draw on ye fust," he went on, speaking to Silsby. "The only reason he didn't git ye was 'cus he'd shot the las' load out uv my gun when he borryed it out yander on the trail. I jes' hed that one left."

Radford gazed at the stiffening form of Bullen—of Barrington, as he had known him. He marveled at the curious way in which justice had been meted out to him. Intending to kill the man he had wronged, he drew — an empty gun.

There was not a shadow of doubt but that he had recognized Silsby first and had meant to kill him. Only fate changed the issue of the scene.

Out under a pile of rocks where he had thoughtfully hid it before he approached the place where he had expected to find its worth, Ted had hidden the deed. But it was not of that he was thinking.

Already his mind had leaped across the continent. His mother need never know the truth about the man she had married and who had so ruthlessly victimized her son to keep uncontested possession of what he wanted.

That the three deeds represented Barrington's wealth Ted was to learn later. Now he began to plan how the body of Nick Bullen could be sent East and treated with the respect and ceremony due the president of the Bonita Mining Company and his mother's husband.

With the connivance of the sheriff and his friends, Radford succeeded in saving his mother from the painful knowledge. She was too unfamiliar with the ways of mines and miners to find anything extraordinary in the explanation that Barrington had been killed by an unknown enemy, who was finally run down and discovered to be a half-demented creature who was promptly incarcerated.

Williams the butler and Sullivan the detective had helped Stratton and Ted when they began to trace out the means by which Barrington had perfected his evidence against his stepson. Williams, for a consideration and after he found that the young master of the house was not the real head, turned over the blood-stained handkerchief on which Ted's monogram was betrayingly embroidered.

Sullivan acknowledged that the real cause of his visit to the house was to correct his own carelessness in watching. He had deserted his post and later found that a policeman had knocked down a man who was trying to enter the Radford house through the delivery entrance when some supplies were being carried in.

While he had been overlooked as unconscious and unable to get himself away without the ambulance that the police had gone to call, the man had disappeared. A strange-looking individual had staggered up the front steps and darted in with some guests, and the episode had been reported to Sullivan.

The wound in Watson's forehead and its flowing blood, which stained Radford's hand as he defended himself against the stranger's approach, was explained. And Ted could readily see that he had mistaken the name Watson had written for his own when it was really an inquiry for the man he came to see. It accounted for the way in which the sick man had flown into a

frenzy whenever he was addressed by the name of his enemy.

Stratton's wooing was record-breaking in its brevity and conciseness.

"Ted won't have you, Bess. You're *mine.*"

Radford came into his own splendidly. As the manager of his mother's interests, he controlled and directed his own property, knowing that he held his deeds to the mine if it were ever necessary to assert his claim.

But it was as he crossed the rough way from the storehouse to go over to the mining town on the railroad that his real kingdom opened to him. The queen of the love realm he was to possess met him like a small human whirlwind.

She flung herself in his arms, regardless of miners and other observers.

"You are not hurt? You are well? They deed not shoot you?" she cried, feeling the broad shoulders and the strong arms with trembling hands.

Big Red flourished a gun with an abandon that sent the observers into speedy retreat.

"Hike!" he yelled as if there were cause for some kind of celebration.

But Radford paid no attention to the hikers. He was making for a big rock that promised inviting and inviolate shadows to eager lovers.

Natalie cornered in the bend of his right arm and forearm as they went.

Around the abutting rock he hurried the little lady. Secure from sight, he stopped and let her go.

"Now, Natalie, I am free from any shadow of dishonor. I am worthy of your love. Will you marry me?" he asked, holding hard on his clamoring senses, trying to keep the strong wings of his love from carrying him away and her with him.

It was her right to know that he was clean of blame. He must give her a chance to choose. She was so little, so insinuatingly, bewitchingly tiny, that he felt he must keep his big arms and his aching hands from touching her till she had given him the privilege.

"How can I—eef there ees another girl who weel—"

"Natalie! Natalie! Natalie! I love you—not her. Nothing but real love ever justifies the risk of matrimony! I mean to tell her she can't have me—if you'll take me. She does not love me. She does not know love—"

"Ah! M. Wiseman, you are not so smart as you theenk! Your friend, the beeg Midge, try to find out so much of me—and I find heem out! He loves your sweetheart!" she exclaimed, on tiptoe beside him and lifting her head so that the fragrance of her and the near sweetness of her lips went to his head like wine.

"Natalie! That's great! We'll be married when they are!" he exclaimed, reaching for her.

She slipped like a butterfly beyond his arms.

"*Non, non;* she has the trousseau all ready! You will marry more queeck eef you marry her!" she taunted.

But Radford's blood was singing at his ears. His eyes were aching. His ears drank her voice. He felt too much to let her trifle longer.

"Natalie—come!"

Silently she went to him; silently he folded her in his arms.

Big Red never has finished wondering what kind of an animal it was that scared him and Silsby on the trail—scared him so he yelled out in desperation and demanded if it was Radford. He could have had his curiosity gratified if he had asked the sheriff and his deputy, who had crawled on hands and knees along the dark trail to keep from tumbling into the gulch. But he did not.

Radford regained his power of speech after a while.

"To think, little Bitter-Sweet, that I'll have you where I can hear and see and—kiss you all the time! It's heaven!"

THE END.

Sailing With Morgan

by

George Brydges Rodney

(A COMPLETE NOVELETTE.)

CHAPTER I.

THE GRAND MODEL.

IT was the division of the land that was primarily the cause of all the trouble. If there had been no proposal for an unfair division of the fields that we had settled, cleared, and planted, I would never have got into the great trouble that follows.

Yet it was this same trouble that brought to me the greatest happiness that life holds.

In the first place, the Grand Model as devised by that ingenious philosopher, Mr. Locke, sowed the seeds of dissension. In truth, Mr. Locke may have been a very great philosopher, but he did not know a great deal of human nature.

I have often thought, indeed, that the crux of the matter lay with Lord Shaftesbury, at whose instigation the Grand Model was written, for he was really the promoter of the enterprise. Many of his friends and relatives were to profit by it, as was afterward shown before Parliament.

He must have known that trouble would ensue when gentlemen at home in England, sitting over their long pipes and ale, calmly planning a system that should take from us those lands that we had won from the red man, cleared, planted, and stood ready to defend, and give them to men of whom we had never even heard.

Landgraves, as designed in the Grand Model, with their attendant knights and bannerets, might thrive along the banks of the Rhine and the Meuse; but the Chowan and the James were no place for them. They held by tradition in the old country; we held by an ax and musket in the new.

For months we had heard rumors of this new scheme that Locke had perfected in London that was to divide the American wilderness into great tracts, with feudal rights that were to be bestowed upon so-called landgraves with hereditary titles, and from whom we gentlemen planters were to hold our fiefs on feudal tenure; but it seemed to us so foolish a conception that we gave no credence to the tales, holding it, indeed, to be but back-stairs gossip.

"Even Shaftesbury, grasping as he is for honor and preferment, cannot fail to see that it means the death blow to any hopes of making a permanent colony here," said my father.

Mr. Ames shook his head despond-

ently. "Many things seem hard and not just to us out here which are esteemed right at home," he said. "The art of governing is not to be learned in a day, Friend Upholme."

"That," said my father, "is a great truth, and, having shed my blood on a dozen fields for my king, I have earned the right to say that it is doubly true that it will never be learned by the House of Stuart. Here have I lived for five years under my grant from Lord Clarendon, and by that grant I shall continue to hold while grass grows and water runs. It is in fee simple and it runs 'A thousand acres, with rights, water, and turbary, glebe, field, and quarry.' I shall hold by what I say."

Mr. Ames shook his head again. "The letter bears the seal of the grand chancellor," he said.

"And I have fought for a better man than that man's master, and for my service the grant was given. What does the letter say?"

For answer, Mr. Ames pulled a paper from his pocket, drew the candles closer to him across the rough table, and read, spelling slowly as he followed his finger across the written page.

When he was done my father sat back and whistled. I can see it all as if at this moment before me. The roughly built walls of rudely squared logs, bearing only some sconces made of buckhorn in which, when we wished more light than our home-made candles made, we thrust the pine torches; a few pairs of deer antlers to hold our guns and clothes, and a curtain that was hung across the far end of the room, dividing the cabin into two compartments.

This was "Upholme Hill," with never a hill for ten miles on any hand, except the rise on which the house stood, and to gain even this place my father had undergone dangers and privations greater than most, and in those days that was great indeed.

He had borne King Charles's commission as a captain of horse under Prince Rupert; but after the great cavalry fight at Edge Hill he found himself useless by reason of a pike thrust in the groin, that sent him through the rest of his life on a stick.

For his services he was given this grant of land, which was afterward confirmed by Cromwell, who wisely believed it was better to build a golden bridge for a flying enemy, and to this place we had come five years before.

I was sixteen years of age at the time, so that I remembered much of our wanderings about the Continent and the many makeshifts to which we were put to live.

My father clerked in Holland for months; once he was put to it to roll barrels from the cargo of a Dutch lugger in Holland to pay for our meals alone, always striving to make and save a sum to pay our way to the grant of land in the Plantation; but it was not till five years before I write of that the death of an old cousin gave him means enough to purchase our passage and to buy for us a few bales of those things that would be of the most use to us in our new life beyond the seas. So we passed out of Southampton Water, bound for our new home.

The five years had not done much for us in the goods of this world. The whole tract was forest-covered, and it took us the first year, with the help of two negro slaves that my father had bought in the Virginias, to clear land enough to enable us to plant corn for our food and to raise enough tobacco to pay for clothes and powder.

We had built the cabin on the rising ground above the Chowan where the pine forest gave place to the knee-deep grasses, and from our door, where we sat on moonlit summer nights, we could see the great silver moon swing up out of the broad Atlantic, while the melancholy notes of the whippoorwill sounded plaintively from the forest.

Yes, this was Upholme Hill. To such hard case were we brought, and

even this place, men now said, we must hold in fee, and that from a man who had never even seen it.

Our case was that of every gentleman planter along the coast. No wonder that every planter in the province felt his gorge rise. No wonder that no one agreed with old Mr. Ames, who always counseled peace.

They were not men of peace, these planters. Each of them could show his wounds, for they had been bred in the school of war when all Europe was a vast armed camp, when John Sobieski was thundering at the gates of Vienna. To these men he wasted his breath when he counseled peace.

When he had finished reading Mr. Ames sat back and pursed his under lip between his thumb and forefinger.

"It seems to me a time for debate," he said slowly. "In a multitude of councilors there is wisdom," says Solomon, and that is something that we will not get to-day from any one man along the coast who has heard of this nefarious plan."

So it was that our two slaves were sent with notes that very night to every man within a ten-mile radius, and the next night found them assembled for council at Upholme Hill.

By forest trails, dank with the gray moss festooned from the boughs of the great live-oaks, by inland waterways, on foot, on horseback, and by boat they came, so that forty men were gathered in our clearing.

For long they were divided among themselves as to the best course. Many were for fight, yet common sense told us what the result of that must be. Claiborne's Rebellion was not so far past that men had forgotten what happened when a small, poor people took arms in their own behalf.

"Gad, Upholme! It seems to me that thou hast brought us here to show us our own folly. What is thy advice? Speak."

My father slowly took his pipe from his mouth as he answered: "I counsel war and I counsel peace."

Colonel Wentworth laughed. "As how, thou man of Edge Hill? Speak out."

"What is held of most value to-day in England?"

"Good wine," said one.

"A pretty woman," said another. Some laughed.

"Tobacco," said my father. "We will carry the war into Africa, like Scipio Africanus; but we must have the funds of war. Since we have no gold, let each man of us contribute to the common stock all the tobacco that he can spare, and we will lade our own ship for London town, and with the money that we get from the sale of the crop we will buy justice, since it is for sale. We cannot get it unless we pay the price, for justice is to-day for sale in England just as much as beauty or love or virtue, or aught else that a man desires."

He looked very grim as he said this. Away back in the crowd some one laughed; but it was not a laugh of merriment. It was a serious matter indeed for us.

"Who is there among us who can go to act for us as our factor? To sell the cargo for us or to store it if the price be not good? Who is there who can afford to take from his life here on his plantation six months of such a year as this promises to be? Those of us who have growing crops cannot afford to go. Who can we send to lay our case before the proper persons?"

Mr. Ames held up his hand for silence.

"This is a matter," he said, "that does not require age or a gray head. The man must be one of us—a gentleman, not a servant. A man who has seen something of the world, who can represent us in a fit and proper way. Stephen Upholme is the man whom I suggest." He placed his hand upon my shoulder as he spoke and gently swayed me to and fro as I sat.

There was a short silence, broken by Colonel Wentworth. "He is my

choice, too," he said. "What say you, gentlemen? Shall Stephen Upholme be your representative to lade your vessel, to go to London, sell your crops, and lay your complaints, if need be, before the king?"

By quiet nods and low-voiced phrases they voiced their approval, and I felt the blood run quicker along my veins as I realized that I was again to see the dear old land that my father and I loved so dearly.

"We will begin sending our crops down to you to-morrow, Stephen," said Mr. Lane as he shook my hand at parting. "You should see the captain of the Lone Star to-morrow. Time is of value."

"And remember, too, boy," chuckled old Colonel Wentworth, as he too took my hand, "when thou art there in London, remember the truth of the old Spanish proverb: 'The judge is a great man, but give thy money to the clerk.' Good-by, lad!"

So it was settled before they left that I was to go, and many times that night did I see my father look oddly at me.

"Stevie," says he kindly, "thou art indeed going, and I had not even begun to realize that thou art a man indeed in strength and sinew. Thou wilt see strange sights, lad, and thou wilt some day do brave things, and I— Good night, lad! Good night!" and he stumbled off to bed behind his curtain.

Little did either of us guess how prophetic his words would be before six months were gone.

CHAPTER II.

THE TAKING OF THE LONE STAR.

THE Lone Star was swinging at her moorings in midstream, riding to a single anchor, when I went to the landing to hail for a boat. My repeated shouts brought a gruff: "Hello, the shore!" and a boat slowly sculled in to the pierhead.

I found Captain Blew seated in the little cabin, casting up his accounts. He looked at me with puzzled face as I entered, repeating to himself half aloud: "Seven an' two's eleven an' times two's twenty-two— Well, sir?"

I told him who I was and his brow cleared. The Lone Star was owned by the gentlemen planters of the coast, and as his pay the master was allowed, in addition to a small monthly pay, a certain number of cubic feet of hold space to accommodate any private venture that he might care to make.

He was always glad to get a cargo, and he hated any delay in port except in London. I told him that it was desired to stow cargo at once.

"How much have you?" he asked.

I told him as nearly as I could, adding that we would fill up with corn as ballast.

"When can we begin to load?" I asked.

"I'll warp her into the dock at once, sir. Get your niggers to work on your stagin' and we'll begin to hoist in this afternoon."

By midday wagons had begun to come in with their loads of bales and rolls of tobacco, and boat after boat slid softly along the still waters of the Sound; even rafts were used. Lines of singing slaves toiled lustily by the light of the smoky torches improvised from pine-knots; the tackle creaked and groaned, and the ropes squealed dryly through the sheaves of the blocks as the bales were lowered to the men below. And over all the great silver moon shone placidly on field, on forest, and on river.

By the next night we were full to the hatches, the covers battened down, casks filled, and crew aboard, and early in the morning when the young ebb was making we slipped our moorings and headed for the open sea.

The Lone Star was a small vessel, not over a hundred tons as I remember her, and her freeboard was like a house. Great apple-shaped bows el-

bowed her way through the water, for she was built for stowage and not for speed.

We carried a small crew for those days—master, first and second officers, carpenter, cook, and seven seamen. The carpenter stood watch like the rest. I was the only landsman in the after-guard.

When we had dropped the land fairly astern the anchors were stowed inboard, the cables unbent and sent below, the crew divided into watches, and, tired with my unwonted exertions of the night before, I went below, and, crawling into the little standing berth that had been allotted to me, I fell sound asleep.

When I awoke it was in pitchy darkness, so I judged that I must have slept at least ten hours. The bark was rolling heavily, and every mast and spar seemed to have a shrill note of its own.

The timbers cracked like musket-fire, and the swirl and gurgle of the water past the run came to me in the silences between the gusts of rain that drove down upon the decks.

I pulled on the clothes most easily reached and, clawing my way along the cuddy-table, crawled up the companionway. The hatch-cover was drawn, but it gave under my hand and I crawled out upon the wet decks.

A gray dawn was breaking wetly in the east. The bark was making heavy weather of it and was shipping green seas over her knighthead. They piled aft to the foot of the deck-house where they broke, throwing their spume aft in smoky masses, while lines of spindrift ran aft alongside.

Aloft, a rag of a foretopsail was showing to the wind, and the spanker was low-reefed; forward, the spritsail had blown from the bolt-ropes, and the two men at the tiller strained and heaved at the long beam.

There was now no question of holding her up to her course, so we ran straight before the wind.

"Gulf Stream weather, Mr. Upholme," said Mr. Oakes, the mate, as he clawed past me along the lee rail. "A bit wet, eh?"

I nodded, attempting no more, for I was as sick as a dog. Presently I felt better.

"When did this storm begin?" I asked.

"Lord love you, man! This is no storm. Just a good sailing breeze. Forward, there! Bo'swain, get a rag more o' that mainsail set to the wind. She'll steer easier."

I shall never forget that day, nor the next, nor the next, nor indeed any of those that followed. Wind, wind, wind, and rain, rain, rain, and always I was sick, and always I gnawed away at the tough salt beef or swigged at a bottle of ale that the steward set before me.

The weather grew worse and worse till the gale from the northwest was heavier than any I had ever seen before, or had even dreamed as possible, and this was not my first voyage. It was on the fourth night that the accident happened.

When I turned in it was with an ill-defined feeling that all was not well. Captain Blew looked tired out when he came down for his cold supper, and for the first time since we sailed I saw him refuse the bottle of grog that Mr. Oakes pushed across the table to him.

"Not now," he said. "We may need all the wits we've got if this wind holds."

The gale did hold, and all night long it howled and snatched at us—and in the late hours of the night I heard or rather felt a crash that shook the little bark from stem to stern.

It seemed an eternity before I could get out of that close little cabin, for the hatch was close-drawn, and all the time that I stood panic-blinded and sweating like a frightened horse I heard oaths and blows on the wet decks outside.

Finally the hatch opened suddenly, and I pitched forward upon my hands

and knees, bringing up against the wreck of the binnacle.

The bark looked a wreck. The bowsprit was driven in and splintered, the foretopmast gone half-way up, and the foreyard was sprung in the cap.

The mainmast stood fast, but the mizzen had been cut away two feet above the deck and lay alongside, churning against the quarter, to which it was held by the lee shrouds, still uncut. The binnacle was gone and the long felucca boom was a mass of splinters.

"Bear a hand now with an ax and clear away that wreck! That but'll start a timber next," and Mr. Oakes sprang to the flattened poop bulwark.

"Steady, there! Bend a hawser to them shrouds yonder and pay it out so we can use that wreck for a sea-anchor!"

Captain Blew sprang forward among us.

"Quick, all hands now! We've got to bring her head up. The mast in its fall has smashed the binnacle and the compass's gone, to say nothing of the rudder driven into kindling-wood for the galley fire."

Mr. Oakes swore softly.

Then all at once it seemed to me that the wind shifted and a great gray sun looked at us from a grayer sky. I remember some one calling to me to: "Look aloft, there!" Then came a crash on my head, a blinding blaze of white light before my eyes, and all was dark.

When I regained my consciousness I was in my berth and Mr. Oakes was holding a noggin of rum to my lips. I must have looked my question, for he said: "It was a block falling from aloft. It's a wonder it didn't kill you. Take this." I drank and slept again.

When I awoke I dressed and made my way painfully into the cabin, where Captain Blew sat solemnly sucking the back of his forefinger, while with the other hand he scrawled some figures with a piece of chalk upon a small blackboard.

"And this is hell! 'Morning to you, Mr. Stephen! We're three men short—"

"Who?"

"Evans, Cooper, and Wilson. Carried away by a sea. Compass and rudder gone. Bearings lost—I haven't seen the sun for four days. I can figure out my longitude, but I can't tell within five hundred miles o' where we are. What's that?"

"Land, ho!" was shouted from the deck, and Mr. Oakes appeared in the open square of the hatch to repeat the news. Both of us scurried for the deck where the men were gathered by the rail, gazing off at the blur of blueness to the southeast.

All that day we drifted landward, and not till evening could we make out the long line of nodding feathery palms fringing the golden sea-beach. A gray stone mole jutted seaward and a white-housed, red-roofed town lay at the foot of a towering, blue mountain-peak whose summit was shrouded in mist.

"What land is that captain?"

"It might be any land, Mr. Stephen, from the Havanas to Manoa, the Golden City. Just now I'm thinking it's a bad land-fall for us. And yonder come the ground-sharks!"

He pointed to a long, low galley that seemed to spring from the *muella* and, driven by its forty oars, crept like a giant insect toward us. Outboard, a long, sharp snout like a ram extended some ten feet over the water, and inboard we could see the benches where the oars were double-banked by the slaves, all chained to the oars, and also to the benches, so that if an accident should happen to the craft the rowers would go down with their ship.

A strong roundhouse amidships was crammed with soldiery and a couple of brass sakers glittered upon the poop.

Suddenly she stopped and the slaves poised their oars, resting on the massive looms as the hail came across the twenty yards of water. The language was Spanish and the voice said:

"*Quien estais ustedes? Inglesos?*"

"*Si, si!*" answered Mr. Blew.

"What do you here?"

"Stress of weather, *señor!* We were dismasted by a storm four days since. I am short-handed and—"

He got no further, when the galley dropped alongside. Ten soldiers sprang aboard, and before we had sufficient time in which to remonstrate against this high-handedness we found ourselves prisoners in the roundhouse on the galley, the door closed, and a sentry set.

All attempts on our part to enter into conversation with our captors were met with "*Silencio, silencio!*" from the sentry, and when we were landed on the stone *muello* the threatening aspect of the crowd that gathered at the dockhead made us glad of the protection of the soldiers.

We were marched along a narrow, not overclean street from the head of the landing, up past the plaza and the palace of the governor beyond the great cathedral to the presidio, which was surrounded by high, massive walls, below which was a moat across which a drawbridge gave access to the sally-port.

A port-cullis, half raised, creaked, and when we had crossed dropped into place behind us with an ill-omened clang.

The main-guard turned out with a clash of muskets and a ringing of sword-blades, and a moment later we were rudely pushed down into a long, dark corridor that was dimly lighted by old-fashioned arrow-slits.

A number of small doors opened into this corridor. One of these was opened with a clang. Oakes and I were roughly shoved inside, and the door was closed and locked on us before we had found our feet, leaving us in semidarkness.

It was long before my eyes became used to the dusky twilight. I got to my feet and stumbled aimlessly across the stone floor.

Oakes heard me and called out quickly: "You had better sit down and stay down, Upholme, till we get some kind of a light. There may be a hole that you'll fall into. Wait a bit! I have a tinder-box and a bit of candle if I can get to it."

I heard the *clink, clink!* of the flint striking against the steel, then Oakes swearing softly as he struck his knuckle; then a spark fell and a tiny flame appeared with Oakes's face blowing in the middle of it. His face looked careworn and anxious.

"You look worried," I said.

"I have need to, lad. Do you remember that we are in the hands of the Spaniards, and that the only foreigners that they see are the buccaneers, or, as they call themselves, the Brethren of the Coast? There has been war here for forty years."

"Why, yes, I know we are in the hands of the Spaniards," I said. The words meant little to me. It had been no infrequent thing in the past three years to have a Spanish trader drop anchor in the Sound and barter his wines and spices for foodstuffs.

"Aye, aye! I hope I'm wrong, but a Jack Spaniard trading when the other man is the stronger is a different man from the same Spaniard when he has you safe in his clutches. Besides that, they fear us, lad; not you nor me, but every man who has a sword-hand and the will to use it. They fear every able-bodied man that trades or sails along the Spanish Main. And, above all, they fear Morgan, and they seem to think that every man who is not a Spaniard is in league with him."

"What has he done, then?" I asked.

He hooted in derision. "Not know of Morgan! Why, lad, he is the best master of freebooters that we have seen this hundred years since Drake. But he does not fight like Drake, who with all his faults was a gentleman. Morgan is a freebooter, pure and simple. Wait—there comes some one!"

The door clanged open slowly and four men entered. The leader addressed us roughly, asking me if we

spoke Spanish. I said: "Yes — a little."

"It's a pity you said that," said Oakes. "That'll be another point that they'll use against us to convict us—"

"Of what?" I asked.

"Of being Brethren of the Coast," he said simply. "You know—Morgan's men. If I'm not very much mistaken, they'll ask us about that. Ah, you devil! You fear even the name, do you?"

For at the name of Morgan one of the soldiers had struck him violently across the back with his pike.

They marched us slowly up the steps to the main guard-room, where fish and dry bread were given to us with a cup of warm water, and when we had eaten we were bidden follow the guard to the great room on the floor above, where we were to be questioned by the governor.

The governor sat at a long table with a dish of nuts and raisins before him. Near him at a small table sat a clerk and a couple of priests in the black robes of the order of Dominicans sat behind him in the shadow.

We were hustled unceremoniously up the room and for a moment no one spoke, the only sound that broke the stillness being the crackle of the stiff paper as the clerk flattened the page.

For a moment the governor eyed us sternly. Oakes's brows drew tense under the supercilious scrutiny, and for all his fifty years he flushed with anger at the lack of consideration shown us.

"Who are you?" the Spaniard asked shortly.

"Two Englishman, *señor*. I am a sailor; my friend there is a gentleman planter—"

"Whence come you?"

"From the plantation of Albemarle, east-bound with a cargo of tobacco and corn. We were driven out of our course and dismasted, and we lost three men—"

"How comes it that you speak Spanish?"

Oakes explained that he had traded along the coast from time to time.

"In absolute defiance of our orders in council! It is a bad time of the year for you to be driven into a Spanish port. The failure of Morgan's attempt on Nata brings him new men, it seems. I fear you have made a bad landfall and that the northern coast was your goal."

One of the priests spoke to him in a whisper. He listened attentively for a moment.

"You can give me no proof of your identity," he said angrily. "To us you are not only masterless men who are vagrants and dangerous characters, but I fear you are on the way to join the freebooters who infest the upper coast—"

I started a denial.

"Silence, dog! Who spoke to you? Will you enlist under our colors to repel the attack of these pirates?"

"Will you fight against Englishmen, however bad they may be, Mr. Stephen, to save your own skin? These men have no intention of living up to their promises." Oakes spoke in a low voice.

"Not I—"

"Whether you enlist or not," said the governor smoothly, "you will both be required to work daily in the shipyard under guard. I will have no idlers here."

I felt the blood run back to my heart at the words, for I knew now what they meant. Oakes, too, fell silent, and we were led back to our little cell, the door shut noisily, and the sound of the footsteps in the vaulted corridor died away in the stillness.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE HANDS OF THE SPANIARDS.

For a little while neither of us spoke. Then Oakes: "Well, lad, this is a pretty kettle of fish that we have landed."

He fell silent for a space.

He cut a chunk from a huge piece of pudding tobacco, stowed it in his cheek, placed his elbows on his knees, hooked his fingers together, and ruminated deeply.

"Once we're clear o' here, lad, it's sixty miles on end to Tortué Channel and the Tortugas, where the Spanish governor or his friend, the devil, dare not come. Aye! To get clear! That's it. Let's take a look at our berth."

The walls were of masonry four feet thick, and the only window in the room was something less than two feet square, splaying outward. The inner end was barred by an iron bar an inch square let into the stonework horizontally; the ends of the bar were cemented into the stone with molten lead.

Below the window, as well as we could remember, was a yard enclosed by a great wall covered with pike-heads, and beyond that lay the moat. The glacis sloped gradually down to the sea beach, so that from the walls of the work the guns absolutely commanded the sea beach and the approach by water. We recollected this afterward; we had cause to do so.

We could see no prospect of escape, for our knives had been taken from us and we had no means of getting the iron bar loose from the window. We pulled and pried at the iron, but it was as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar, so we finally gave up any hope that we may have had of loosening it, and, tired out with our exertions, we lay down and slept uneasily till well on into the afternoon, when the harsh grating of the ponderous key in the lock awakened us.

A heavy guard, commanded by an officer, stood in the corridor. He motioned to me to come outside to him, and as I passed the door I was seized by two men, my arms fastened behind my back with a heavy iron handcuff, and I was bid stand to one side.

Then they did the same by Oakes and, falling us in between two soldiers, the rest of the guard formed behind us and marched us up through the guard-house into a small stone building that stood in the center of the patio.

At a table in the room sat one of the priests whom we had seen that morning, and the governor's clerk sat near him. My blood seemed to turn cold as he smiled evilly at us.

Oakes said to me in a low voice: "Our time is on us, Mr. Stephen. Keep thy tongue still. Do not cry out if it can be avoided."

The clerk motioned to the soldiers, who in a moment had seized Oakes and led him up before the table. Me they left with the rest of the guard, who held me firmly by the door.

The clerk gave the men who held Oakes curt bidding to strip him. It was quickly done, and, naked from neck to waist, he stood and glared. His great arms were knotted with muscles that seemed to play rapidly like flowing water as they expanded and contracted under the dark skin.

"What is thy name?"

"John Oakes. Englishman. Master mariner.

"Hast thou ever heard of L'Ollonois?"

"Yes, *señor*, I have heard of him. He sacked Maracaibo."

"He did." The Spaniard's teeth set grimly. "Dost thou know of Morgan and Mansvelt, also?"

"I have heard also of them."

"Where are they now?"

"*Señor*, I do not know. I never knew of them save by repute."

A great bell-mouthed arquebus was thrust into his face by one of the guards, and I stood astonished to see him spit vigorously down the muzzle. In a moment they had seized him and the soldiers stood looking to their masters for instructions.

"*La almohaza*—the curry-comb!" said the clerk shortly.

Instantly two of the men dragged into the room a curious-looking machine. It was a long, narrow table, bearing upon its upper surface a long wooden cylinder which was covered

with long rows of sharp metal hooks. The cylinder was revolved by a rough wooden handle.

Before I had time to take in what they did they had seized Oakes, strapped him to the table, and fastened his left arm to the standards of the table below the cylinder.

A negro slave gave the handle a half-turn.

I saw the hooks sink deep in the arm, and my friend turned white as each hook tore its way through the sensitive tissues and came away with its mouthful of flesh.

I turned faint and sick, and the soldier who stood near me whispered: "Speak and tell what thou knowest and so make his torture short. This is but the beginning."

In that moment the full devilishness of the whole scheme first dawned upon me. They had selected Oakes for the torture as being the best fitted to endure the physical pain and the least likely of us to give way under mental terrors.

Me they had chosen as being more likely to be impressed by what I should see, and they thought that the sight of the sufferings of my companion would loose my tongue. It is likely that this would have been true had I aught to tell; but I knew nothing, and so could but close my eyes and bite my lips.

A sharp prick in the neck from a dagger-point made me promptly open my eyes again as the clerk said sourly:

"Keep thine eyes open or we will close them forever by simply passing a red-hot bowl before them."

After ten minutes that seemed a lifetime to me they released Oakes and let him stagger back with me to our cell. Also, they gave us food and a cup of wine, and, with a growling caution that we be more ready to talk upon the morrow, left us to our own devices.

The arm was exceedingly painful, but it was not seriously hurt; but we knew now that this was but the forerunner of worse upon the morrow.

I suspected that fever had already set in when Oakes stopped me when I was half through bandaging the wound by saying: "This settles it, lad. I have heard that the Spaniard could give lessons to the devil in cruelty, but this passes all. We will leave here tonight. Even if they kill us, it is better to be killed in fight than to be tortured. Use thy brains and help me to a plan."

We discussed many plans that would have been feasible could we once get beyond the walls of the fortalice, but all came back to that.

Finally Oakes said: "The main thing is to get the sentry within the room and far enough from the door to give us a chance to overpower him. He never comes two feet within the doorway. Center thy mind on that, lad. That is the milk in the coconut."

"I have it!" I shouted. "I have it!" I pointed to the window.

He looked at me suspiciously as I sat down upon the floor and proceeded to remove my small clothes.

"Now, give me the straw from the bedding."

He brought it, and in a moment I had filled my breeches with it till, as I held them up, they looked better than they ever did when I myself stood in them.

"What now?" he asked.

I took the stockings and the shoes and stuffed them, too, with straw, tying them firmly to their proper places at the bottom of the legs of the breeches. The effigy thus made we carried it to the window and laid it in the opening, with the back toward the door, so that in the half dusk it looked for all the world as though a man was in the act of climbing out of the embrasure.

"Well, what now?"

"Not a thing," I said. "Sit behind the door and watch. It is near time for the guard to bring us our supper. When he opens the door he will see neither you nor me; only that figure in the embrasure of the window, which

he will take for one of us. He may hail the guard, but my hope is that, in his surprise, he will run to the window, believing that one of us has escaped and that the other is following. If he does that he is ours."

Oakes's teeth shut with a snap. "I have but one wish. To get my fingers on their windpipes. Listen!"

We heard the lingering footsteps of a sentry draw down the corridor, a hand fumbled at the door, and the great lock groaned as the wards of the key caught the bars and the door pushed open.

We shrank back flat against the wall behind us. For a moment there was silence as the eyes of the sentry accustomed themselves to the dusk.

Then he saw the figure in the window, and with a "*Porvida! Santos!*" he sprang forward and laid hand upon the effigy.

Instantly I threw my weight upon the door, slamming it into place, snatched the key from the lock, and fastened it upon the inside. Oakes sprang upon the Spaniard with a growl of joy.

He never had any chance from the first. Taken half by surprise, he was helpless before he realized that Oakes had seized the *miseracordia,* the long dagger that was habitually carried by Spanish soldiers, and hurled the man back upon the stone floor.

I promptly sprang upon him and held him while my companion quickly cut his leather coat into strips, with two of which he tied the hands of the Spaniard behind his back.

I was relieved. I had thought to see the *miseracordia* find a sheath in the breast of the sentry.

"Because," said Oakes, addressing the man, while I hurried into my clothes—"because thy errand here has always been to bring us food, and because thou hast not abused us I give thee thy life for this time. See to it that our paths do not cross again. How many men are there in the main guard-room?"

The man was silent.

"I gave thee thy life," said Oakes sharply; "but if thou wilt not talk, then a cord about thy temples and a stick to turn it—"

"*Señor! Señor!* I will speak!"

"I thought you would," said Oakes grimly. "Now, then, how many men are there in the guard-room?"

"Four, *señor.* The rest have gone to the *posada* for their supper."

"Is the portcullis raised?"

"*Si, señor.* And the draw-bridge down and will be until sunset, perhaps a half-hour yet—"

"Come on, then, Upholme! Lock the door and take the key, if no better weapon offers."

It was a foot long and was made of heavy iron.

"Out into the open," he said. "Seize what arms we can and then make for the sea—"

"Wait a bit! There are many boats and they can easily retake us. I speak for the hills and the darkness of the night—"

"And then north," said Oakes; "and if they take us, then back to back and fight it out like English mariners. Mind you follow close in my wake! Come on!"

"Wait a bit," I said. "The guard-room door!"

"Aye. A' good suggestion."

He hastily cut a long thong from the leather coat and jerked it into a loop.

"'Twill lock the door on them right handily," he said. "Come on!" And we crept stealthily down the passage.

It was long and dark and damp, and smelled most evilly. My heart was in my throat during those three minutes that we spent in the passage, and then—why it was, I could never understand—all doubts were settled, and I was entirely at my ease as I followed in the footsteps of my friend.

At the turn in the corridor we paused. Through the narrow arch ahead we could see plainly out through the far door which stood open before us under the portcullis, which

threw a checker-board of shadows upon the lowered draw-bridge, the white glare of the dust upon the roadway, where a negro boy held two horses richly caparisoned, as though the riders had just dismounted.

There were four soldiers in the guard-room, and two were shaking dice from an iron gauntlet upon the rough table; the other two were kneeling on the bench, with their elbows on the table, watching the game.

Their swords, with the belts wrapped about the scabbards, lay upon a second table behind them.

Oakes grasped my arm. "Three thrings," he said hoarsely—"seize the swords, bar the door from the outside, and then for the horses yonder! Don't cheer. Come on!"

Like a thunderbolt we were upon them. I saw the *miseracordia* gleam high in air as Oakes drove it home; then the four were on the floor with the table atop as we plunged out of the farther door.

Oakes quickly slipped the loop of his thong through the latch and passed one of the swords through the slack of it, holding the door as if in a vise, and we tore down the path toward the portcullis.

I sprang to the windlass and lowered the grating to a foot from the ground, and we squirmed under it.

The negro boy holding the horses gaped at us, but he had little time to ponder on what it all meant, for Oakes deftly tripped him up as we sprang to the saddles.

A moment later we were in full gallop up the street, leaving behind us the shouts and clamor in the locked guard-room and the excited yelps of the negro boy, who feared for his own skin.

We hastily turned several corners, then pulled down into a steady trot, for we knew that we had a start of a good half-hour, but we did not halt till we reached the line of hills far beyond the city.

"We must travel all night," said Oakes breathlessly. "The blood-hounds, you know, will be laid upon our trail, if they have aught—a girth, or anything with the smell of these horses on it—that will give them the scent. Pray for water."

We pushed on rapidly into the foothills. The vegetation changed rapidly from the rich, languorous tropic growth to the hardier shrubs, and our horses were nearly winded when we at last struck running water.

"Shall we stop and camp?" I asked. We had followed the stream for nearly two miles.

"Not for our lives! There is no halt for us till we sight Tortué Channel, and that is sixty miles. Come on!"

"But where are we bound?"

"Where any sailor can pilot you. Have you heard no rumors of the gathering of the Brethren of the Coast? Two sword-hands will bring their own welcome, and I have a debt to pay. Come on!"

And again we pushed our horses up the narrow gorge.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ESCAPE.

Oh, the memory of that night and the next and the four days following! It was one long, unbroken stretch of riding when the forest was open; and when the jungle closed in upon us, and the growth would not permit the horses to move freely, we dismounted, and toiled and sweated up the steep hillsides covered with rough boulders carpeted with layer upon layer of dense tropical growth.

For food we had what fruit we could find, the roots that we dug, and a few small fish that we managed to catch with our hands.

And always we toiled up and northward, northward ever; for there alone lay safety and security from the pursuit of the Spaniard.

"How far is it, Oakes?" I asked despairingly, when we had traveled in eager haste for three days.

"God knows! Till we reach the sea."

And again we struggled along through the forest that was thinning now to the long grass and the light growth of the *savannas*.

The aspect of the country had changed, now that we had crossed the line of hills, and before us stretched mile upon mile of open, rolling country dotted with clumps of trees, and here and there small droves of cattle dashed out from the grassy swales with their heads down as they tore off across the plain.

"It is a hunters' paradise," muttered Oakes. "I wish there was some way that we could kill one of them cattle. Think you we could hamstring a calf?"

"With these horses?"

"Ah, well, it can't be long now! We should strike the sea to-morrow. It's a fine land."

"Tell me something of it. I never knew that there was such an island except from hearsay. Who are these men to whom we travel? Are they pirates?"

"Pirates? Not they! Not unless Francis Drake was a pirate. I will tell you what I know, and that is little enough?"

He fell silent for a space.

"Well, lad, you know it was first settled by the Spaniard, who held it for many a year till, in 1630 or thereabouts, a little island named St. Christopher was settled by the French. Now, your Frenchman is much like a flea—never long in the same place.

"The Spaniard had killed off the native population in a hundred years, and the cattle that were turned loose to feed themselves throve till the land was filled with them. The French from St. Christopher soon learned that there was money in hides and tallow and salt meat, especially when it only cost them powder and shot to get them, so they began to come in parties of twos and threes, and they made their camps all over the northern parts of the island.

"English came, too, and Dutch, until they were here in such numbers that they took Tortugas as their base and they have had their settlement there for fifty years.

"The Spaniard hates them and fears them, and several times has raided the place, but always when the owners were away. You and I know what a man suffers in the hands of a Spaniard. What wonder, then, that these freebooters, buccaneers, or, as they call themselves, Brethren of the Coast, should wage war on all the Spanish settlements from Mexico to Terra Firma?

"Seven times have they raided the seaports. They have even captured the ship of a vice-admiral of Spain, and they aided us Englishmen in the capture of Jamaica. There have been many brave fighters among them. The best was Jack Mansvelt, but he died a year ago, and now Morgan is the coming man. He is the only man among them who has a head for organizing."

"The Spanish Governor mentioned L'Ollonois. Who was he?"

"A devil incarnate. What is that—a man?"

A figure raised itself above the high grass and a long Spanish gun was thrust almost under our noses as a sharp voice bade us stand.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Answer quickly, for my trigger-finger has an ague in it."

"Friends—Englishmen! Put down your piece, man."

He looked us over for a moment as he lowered his long barrel and stood gazing at us with puckered eyelids. Then I had my first sight of a buccaneer. He was near six feet, and was as spare as a topmast, but every line showed muscle.

His long yellow hair was tied in a great knot on top of his head. His body was covered with a shirt of rough canvas, soiled and blood-stained, which was tucked into a pair of loosely-fitting brown breeches, while shoes of untanned hide covered his feet.

Over his shoulder he wore a bandolier which held the charges for the long Spanish gun with its four-foot barrel on which he now leaned as he looked at us.

"'Twould have served you right," he said, "if I had drilled you with a ball. You scared my game."

He pointed to a great bull which had risen from the grass at the noise of our approach, and was now trotting slowly off to join the herd. "Who are you?"

"Englishmen—sailors from the bark Lone Star wrecked a week ago, and we have just escaped from the hands of the Spaniards in San Marco."

"Where did you get the horses?"

"Took them."

The man laughed grimly. "Come on, then. If you be spies, you will not live long to tell what you see. Follow me."

He led us by a crooked and narrow path through the high grass toward the northeast, directing his steps toward a clump of large trees, from which, when I looked more closely, I saw a column of white smoke rising.

Several men rose at our approach and stood staring at us as we entered the grove. The carcasses of several cattle lay in the clearing, and great quantities of meat cut into narrow strips lay upon wooden grills that were built over small fires.

"Well, Jenkins," said a grave-faced, bearded man coming forward—"who have you here?"

Jenkins told him, and the men crowded about us, asking questions so rapidly that we had no time to answer one before another was asked.

"Wait a bit," said Oakes; "give us meat. We have eaten roots and berries and fruits till I can feel my stomach sticking to my backbone, and I long for the chance to bury my teeth in a five-pound bit o' beef."

One of the men laughed and handed him a great chunk of half-cooked beef that he plucked from a fire.

Oakes cut it in two portions and tossed one of them to me.

"Now," he said when he had finished, "I'll tell you my yarn." And he told them briefly our adventures.

"It sounds queer enough to be true," growled black-beard. "We had no storm last week, did we mates?"

A growl of denial rose from the men about the fire.

"Your story may be true," he continued, "but, on the other hand, it may be that you have come to get news for the Spaniards."

Oakes smiled grimly and bared his arm. "Here," he said sourly, "is one of their love tokens. I owe them a score for that. Judge whether I am likely to get them news save that I can hand them on the point of a pike."

They crowded about us now in earnest, looking at the wounds upon his arm, patting us upon the back, talking and laughing all at once. The sight of the fresh wounds had effectually laid any doubts that they might have had.

"Aye," said the suspicious one, "you shall have your chance for repayment, and that before long. Come on, mates, let's bear up for the island."

Tortuga is a narrow island perhaps twenty miles in length, and it had, as Oakes had told me, long been the gathering place for the freebooters of the Spanish Main.

Here it was that we were, and when the first novelty of our arrival had worn off I began to note carefully the manner of the life and the character of the man who was the talk of Europe and the dread of the Spaniards.

The island had originally been selected because of its fine harbor and because, being detached from the mainland, it was more easily defensible. Men of all nations except the Spanish foregathered there, for in the constant warfare that was being waged it was Spain's hand against the world.

She allowed no trade with her seaports on the Main, and when a merchant was found as bold as old John Hawkins, later the port admiral of Plymouth, who compelled them to trade with him by force of arms, they be-

guiled him by fair promises that were never meant to be kept.

Spain in those days held that no promise made to a heretic was binding. No ill-usage was too severe, no cruelties cruel enough, and by consequence she found that in this settlement on her flank she had a constant source of trouble.

Most of the men were *bona fide* hunters in Hispaniola, and when the Spaniards by gross cruelties drove them from their hunting grounds they retired to Tortuga, where the Spaniards dared not follow them, and being gathered in force they promptly began to devise plans for raids along the coast by way of revenge.

The first raids showed how easy and profitable a matter it was. The Spaniards plundered, killed and tortured them when the buccaneers fell into their hands, and now turn about was fair play. So it kept up for years.

The community into which we were now thrown was a peculiar one. There was little law but one's own will. Though there was no nominal chief or magistrate, yet we soon learned that in case of a dispute all matters were brought to a common council.

The land in the neighborhood of the roadstead where the shipping lay was covered with huts—huts of canvas, huts of logs, huts of brush. Magazines were dug in the earth and banked up with earth and logs.

Storehouses stood further back among the trees, and the most peculiar feature of the place was that there was not to be found a lock nor a bar in the entire settlement, it being held incompatible with the calling of the freebooter to lock up his possessions. All was free—arms, clothing, food, and money were to be had for the asking or for gambling for them.

There were few women, and most of those few were Indian girls. Most of the men lived as the French termed it, *in matelotage*—that is, two men became comrades, hunted together, fought and raided together, and in case of the death of one the other immediately inherited his goods.

Loose as it seems, this plan worked out better than it might be imagined, and the reason whereof is simple. While it appears that the place was lawless, and while it is quite true that there was no actual chief, yet they lived together by groups and they were grouped by crews.

If there were twenty men who always sailed on the Santa Caterina, then those twenty men consorted together, and, being accustomed to obey orders from their officers when at sea, quite naturally fell into the same habit ashore.

It was really a loosely united system in which the governing was by families or groups.

It was to the crew of the Black Prince that we had come while they were hunting in the woods, and it was very easy to see that great happenings were afoot.

Nine vessels lay in the roadstead, and every day boats plied between the magazines and the ships, towing out water-barrels and storing food and powder aboard.

"Where do we go?" I asked of Jenkins one night as we sat before the cabin looking at the groups gathered by the fires.

He winked in answer. "To-morrow," he said; "you can draw a gun from the storehouse and a brace of pistols. You have a sword. And two days from now we will see what we will see."

CHAPTER V.

"THE BRETHREN OF THE COAST."

THE Black Prince was bark-rigged, nearly as big as a third-rate, and was pierced for fourteen guns on her main deck; she was the largest of the fleet that the buccaneers had been able to obtain with the sole exception of the vessel on which Morgan later flew his own flag, for he went to sea with all the pomp of an admiral.

She carried a crew of a hundred and twenty men. It must be remembered that our crews were rarely apportioned to the size of the vessels, because most of our fighting was done ashore.

In the last three years Morgan had not fought a dozen sea fights. The Spanish towns were so accessible and so rich that our vessels were used merely to take us to the place, after which came the real work ashore.

Hetherington was our captain, a slenderly built man with cold gray eyes that when he looked at one made the man feel as though he had suddenly placed his hand upon a toad.

Oakes and I went aboard at dusk, and at moonrise, which was about ten o'clock, we heard the *clank! clank! clank!* of the windlass pawls as anchor after anchor was hove short, and an hour later vessel after vessel slipped quietly out of the harbor, following in the wake of Morgan's own ship, steering by the light of her high poop lanterns as they flashed their radiance into the foaming wake astern.

"Where are we going?" I asked Oakes as we stood by the rail watching the last twinkle of the anchor lights on the few craft that we had left behind as they died away in the smother.

"Sh! Sh! Jenkins tells me that we are to go to the Isle of Cows—*La Isla de Vacas,* as the Spaniards call it—to meet the rest of the fleet, and then for the mainland. Look here, Upholme, it just occurred to me last night! What are you mixed up in this matter for? I am in for my revenge, but you have no right to be periling yourself in such an affair."

"Haven't I? How about my lost cargo of tobacco and corn? Who is to pay me for that? Who is to pay for the loss of the Lone Star, confiscated? And there is the score of seven lives yet to be settled, so far as I know. Don't talk to me of that when our men, if not tortured and killed, are working as slaves in the galleys or on the plantations of some Spanish don."

He laughed harshly. "Sits the wind in that quarter? I like it in you, lad," and he thrust out his sound hand to me.

Early the next morning, while I was still at my breakfast, I was aroused by:

"Upholme! Upholme!"

The cry passed along the decks. "Wanted aft in the cabin," and I walked hurriedly up the wide companion ladder and went down into the cabin.

Captain Hetherington sat in the quarter-gallery, a pot of wine before him. Two men sat by him and a red-shirted, black-bearded sentry stood close behind him with a drawn cutlas.

They looked me over as I stood in the doorway. "I have noticed your sword-play," said the captain. "Are you a good shot?"

"I am, sir. I have lived for five years in the plantations, where the most of our food was the game that I killed."

"Show me." He pointed to a long-barreled musket that stood in a rack behind the door.

I took it, opened the pan, and reprimed it, and looked for a mark. A tiny jewel-block that had fetched away aloft swung and jerked at the end of its pendant.

Dropping the barrel of the piece into my extended left hand, I fired. The block flew out with a snap. Captain Hetherington nodded approval.

"That was no difficult task," I said. "I can hit a running buck at a hundred paces."

"Can you read and write as well as you can shoot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Move your bedding aft. Your duties while at sea will be to enter up the log and to do as such work as I give you. You are no sailor, and the men are already too crowded forward."

So it was that again I found myself forming part of the afterguard.

The Isle of Cows lay a good four hundred miles to the southward, and it was near four days till we raised the peak and found our consorts lying in the roadstead.

All the crews were given leave to go ashore, and here I first saw the buccaneer as I was fated to know him in the future. Rioting, drinking, and carousing were the rule and not the exception.

A barrel of rum was broached by our crew, and each man on landing was handed a great pewter mug filled with the potent liquor. It mounted to my brain, and I coughed and spluttered and nearly strangled before I got it down.

A great, burly fellow slapped me upon the back with his naked cutlas as he shouted: "No milk, lad! No milk! Not even in the Isle of Cows! Drink!"

And he pushed the refilled cup under my nose. I shoved it aside with a laugh and passed on, heedless of the curses and threats that followed me.

"Do not answer him," said Oakes, as he saw my hand drop to my sword-hilt. "If you fight, we must fight them all, and discord ashore may mean being shot aboard ship. There goes the blue peter and the boats are putting off. Come on with me."

The blue peter meant immediate departure, so the crews were sent hurriedly aboard, and we weighed anchor again and made for the open sea.

Hardly were we clear of the land when word was passed, "All hands aft," and in response the ship's company fell in below the break of the poop.

It was a rough-looking and most villainous assemblage that waited for the captain, and he evidently noted it as he stood above them, swinging to and fro with the roll of the ship.

"Well, lads! Do you want to know where we go?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" "Yes, sir, let us have it!" "No matter, so it is 'pieces of eight'!" "A fair fight first, and then to play shove-groat with Spanish doubloons."

"Porto Bello," he said shortly and stopped.

A silence fell along the entire deck. Then a murmur of disapproval swept fore and aft among the men. Porto Bello was the strongest town on the whole east coast and was protected by five forts.

It was the port of departure for the plate-fleets that loaded there with bullion and specie brought overland by mule-train from Panama, and it was indeed a daredevil adventure.

"We failed at Nata," shouted a voice. "How, then, can we take Porto Bello?"

"How?" Hetherington waked into life, and his eyes seemed to spit fire.

"By obeying orders, man! Pike and cutlas, with English hands to drive them, can take any walls that Spain has ever builded. We *did* fail at Nata because we were a mixed crew and because you did not back up your leaders. We will take Porto Bello, with our six hundred men, and each man shall have a royal share. Are you afraid?"

A roar of denial burst from the crew, and, to do them justice, that motley gathering feared not God, man, nor devil.

Porto Bello lay about seven hundred miles to the southwest, and each day I noted with increasing interest the distance that was pricked off on the chart as the result of the day's run.

It was on the fifth day that Captain Hetherington laid down the compasses and sat back upon his stool. He had just come from the deck with his reckoning and had plotted it roughly on his map.

"To-night," he said, half to himself and half to me—"to-night we will raise the land, Upholme. See what is wanted."

The dull thunder of a gun from Morgan's ship rolled across the water to us. The leader's ship was flying the signal for council, and so I reported it.

The captain motioned me into the bow of the gig and we pulled for the great vessel lying in the offing.

The great burly figure of the Welshman, clad in tarnished red velvet and, incongruous as it may seem, black leather breeches and wearing a wide-brimmed hat and sea-boots of soft leather, stood by the rail and welcomed his captains with gruff good humor as they came aboard.

It was a curious face; deep devilment showed in the gray eyes and indomitable spirit lurked in the square chin that thrust forward at us. Two pistols lay in his sash and a heavy, handsome cutlas swung from his belt by a silver chain.

"Come below, gentlemen. I must have your words in this matter."

The cabin door closed on the nine, and, leaving the poop, I went forward to learn the temper of the men.

The council was of but short duration, and it seemed but a moment from the time we had boarded the craft till we were again in our boats making for our own vessels, while Morgan's crew lined the rail to watch us as our men gave way, and crew after crew sent up a cheer as the boats sprang through the long surges under the impetus of brawny arms.

On the Black Prince they had got a great grindstone up on deck under the shelter of the galley and were sharpening cutlases and furbishing the pikes, while the armorer was busily engaged in setting new flints in the ship's muskets and pistols.

On board of us, too, the great twenty-four-pounder gun that stood on a pivot amidships, and which was generally covered with the longboat, was cleaned and polished; the breeching-tackle was rove through the blocks, and a dozen balls were placed in the racks along the coamings of the hatchway, while the crew forward had made all the arrangements for the fight that they well knew would come.

We bore away on our course again, and in less than an hour, just before sunset, the call came from the lookout forward, "Land ho!"

"What is it like?"

"Stone fort on the headland, sir. There's a flag flying, too, sir; but I can't make out what it is," and as he answered we saw a puff of white smoke jump out of the blue blur to leeward.

"Crowd on all sail! Set everything that she can carry alow and aloft, Mr. Anderson. I will take the ship." Captain Hetherington began to quietly pace up and down the weather side of the quarterdeck.

The alarm was already given, and nothing was to be gained now by any attempt at concealment, so we ran straight in for the harbor. When we came within cannon-shot, ball after ball fell around us, testifying to the good-will, if not to the good marksmanship, of the Spaniards.

We could not reply without yawing to get the aim with our bow guns, for the pivot-gun was useless as we lay, and it would have been dangerous to expose the ship to the fire of the heavy batteries while we fired in broadside.

"Watch for signals, Upholme! What does that say?" Captain Hetherington pointed to a long string of particolored bunting that was broken out from Morgan's ship.

"Run in to a landing and call away your boarders," I read, and we crowded on all sail. Ship by ship, we ran into the fairway, where six vessels of the squadron unloaded their men under the very guns of the works without damage, for the pieces had been placed to command the approach by sea, and the beach was too close under the walls to be dangerous.

The remaining vessels bore up to the north, and then turned westward around the headland to take the fort in flank.

Ship by ship we passed slowly up the channel, each following close in the wake of the next ahead, and then, as we passed in where we no longer felt the *terral,* as the Spaniard calls the

land-wind, we caught our first sight of Porto Bello.

Short time was ours for debate. Four hundred men were hastily thrown ashore and formed under the shelter of the protecting line of the sand-hills, and then we went pell-mell at the fort, dragging along with us the storming ladders that we had made of light spars and rope while we were still aboard ship.

We were met by a shower of musket-balls as our leaders topped the ramparts, but the Spanish musketeers were forced to keep under cover by the fire of the Hispaniola Hunters, whom Morgan threw forward to command the work.

Not a head could show itself above the crest without being the target for a score of bullets, and so by ladders to the embrasures and by hands and toes and teeth we clawed our way up the scarp of the ditch, over the parapet, and so down into the *terre pleine* of the work.

Fighting, firing, cursing, hewing, it would have taken more than mere men to have stood against that rush, and ever in the very front of the fight was the red-velveted figure now motioning with bloody cutlas for a quick advance, now thrusting and foining with a vigor that seemed to have been born of the pit itself, and at the critical moment the flank attack was pushed home and Judson, with his three crews, came surging in over the northern work, and we saw at last that the fort was ours.

This was the outer work, and we saw, to our dismay, that there were four more to be taken before the town would be at our mercy. This was the first impression that we got; but we had not counted on the military genius of our leader, for, with great discretion, he had picked out the fort that we had taken as being the key to the position, and in taking it we had picked the lock of Porto Bello.

Two forts lay across the entrance to the channel, and their fire would hardly reach the city, for they had been built to repulse an attack by sea and not to cover the defense of the town by land.

No one had ever considered as a possibility the storming of the fort that we had taken, because its guns commanded such a sweep of sea and beach in its immediate front. Of the remaining two forts on our own side of the harbor, both were much lower than the one we had occupied, and we saw the garrison of the farther work hastily leave and take shelter in the woods that crowned the line of low hills to the westward.

Parties of men were moving from the town to the one remaining work that stood between us and complete victory. It was on that remaining entrenchment that our main attack must be made.

Our leaders held momentary debate. "Attack from all four sides," said Morgan, "and move all the guns in this place to the western side, so that their fire will cover us till we get too close to the walls to trust to aught but our pikes and cutlases."

Fifty men were told off to man the guns, and the rest of us plunged on over the low sand-hills, covered with their dense growth of prickly pear and scrubby manzanilla bushes, stumbling along ankle-deep in sand, dripping with sweat, grimed blood and dust and powder-spit.

Our first advance was repulsed and the skirmishers fell back, cursing. Again they pushed forward, swarming up the long spars that they leaned against the embrasures, but with the same result.

Five men carried a brass saker from the fort behind, and, mounting it in the fork of a small tree, they opened fire with it upon the gate.

I was standing near Morgan, when suddenly I saw Hetherington run up to him and point with his drawn sword to a long, white building which crowned a low rise to the north. He spoke rapidly and fiercely, and Mor-

gan listened, his fingers in his beard, and finally nodded assent, roaring with laughter.

Hetherington hastened away, and, calling twenty men to follow him, he stormed up the broad white road to the yard of the convent that we had noticed on the low hills, but which we had supposed was of course abandoned.

A half-hour later he came back with perhaps a hundred prisoners, white-faced, scared women, and priests who looked the personification of terror. Like a herd of cattle they were driven forward, and Morgan pointed to the line of scaling ladders on which he had put some men to work.

They were made of green timber and were long enough to reach the top of the walls, and wide enough to allow four or five men to scramble up abreast.

It was a shameful thing, and as I gazed I felt every drop of blood in my body run back to my heart at the thought of it. To fight behind these! To use the living bodies of priests and women to cover our advance under the fire of the enemy! I cursed and turned away.

It was done. Right or wrong, it was done. The long, black line of trembling priests and timid, white-faced women dragged from their peaceful, religious avocations to take their part in the bloody game of war were driven forward to the piles of ladders, each twenty feet in length and five feet wide, and, taking them up in their arms, they staggered pitifully across the open with their burdens.

Behind them, from the cover of the rising ground, our sharpshooters commanded the walls, and no sooner were the ladders placed than the long line of smoke-begrimed buccaneers stormed forward like a pack of hounds blooded to its kill.

True to his creed, the Spanish governor, ignoring the pleas of the dignitaries of the church, heedless to anything save his duty to his king and country, opened fire on every living thing.

Priests, women, buccaneers, all paid heavy toll to the fire of the enemy. They had but short space for firing, for like a tornado we were upon them, swarming up the ladders, trampling under foot both dead and dying, clawing our way in through the deep embrasures till we surged up about the group of Spanish soldiery like waves beating upon a rock.

There was a deep roar behind us, and the ground trembled as the whole fort burst into a seething mass of flame and smoke from the exploding magazine, where some fool had gone to look for plunder.

A heavy gun ran back on its chase, plowing its way through the group of crazy-eyed fighting men.

A great Spaniard made at me with his pike poised for his thrust, and before I had opportunity to guard I had the point through my shoulder.

Then I heard a muffled crash and saw him totter, and Oakes was grinning over him. A cheer rose from the far corner of the fort where the fighting still continued, and I saw our men fade away from the heap of blood-stained bodies.

Then some one thrust a cup of rum into my hands, and I knew from the great shout that rose from our crews that Porto Bello was ours.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TAKING OF PORTO BELLO.

THAT night Porto Bello fell. Over what happened to the unfortunate city during the next few days it would be well to draw the charitable veil of silence. History will speak of it in no uncertain terms.

I took no part in it, but held it to be only decent to retire to the ship, since there was nothing that I could do to hold back the men.

Fire after fire broke out in the houses, and the wails of the unfortu-

nate people rose to the stars. I watched it for an hour, during which time I saw the bonds of discipline absolutely loosed, and saw what I had never thought to see in a war—a city wholly given over to sack and pillage and placed absolutely at the mercy of a brutal and licentious soldiery.

Oakes kept by me, and once at least he saved me from certain death. A vicious-faced ruffian with two followers came from a house, urging along by thrusts from their cutlases an old man and a boy.

To their demands for ransom the old man protested that he had already been robbed twice that night, and that he had no more money nor goods with which to purchase his release.

Receiving no further reply to his demands for money, probably owing to the fact that he himself spoke very bad Spanish, the ruffian struck the old man over the head with the long barrel of his heavy pistol, kicked the boy across the street, and passed on, swearing. I was about to spring forward to aid the old man when Oakes seized me.

"No, no, lad; keep quiet. Do you not see that we can do nothing? To save our own self-respect as Englishmen let's go back aboard ship. See, yonder stands the captain! Go and tell him that you are weak from your wound and wish to go aboard ship tonight."

Captain Hetherington was standing in the plaza, talking to a group of the officers. Seeing me approach, they stopped talking and with one accord stared at me as I made my request.

"To go aboard ship!" roared Captain Bolton. "Gad, man, the raid has only just began! Have you found the wealth of Manoa and secured it that you wish to stay your hand now? Why do you wish to leave so early in the evening? Ask him why he wishes to go, Hetherington?"

Captain Hetherington smiled sourly as he asked the question. "Well, Upholme, tell Captain Bolton why you make such a peculiar request."

"Because, sir, I came to fight—and I have fought and I wish to rest."

"The work is not over till every ransom is paid, till we have collected payment from church and state—from man, woman, and child. That is your business. If you fail in your work you get no pay."

"I leave my pay to Captain Morgan," I said coolly. "I came to fight in my own private quarrel and to repay myself for losses at the hands of the Spaniards. I have fought with armed men, and I cannot rob old men nor frighten old housewives till they give up their silver spoons."

His hand flew to his pistols that laid in his sash.

"No, sir," I went on. "I do not seek a quarrel, nor do I wish to force one on you. I simply tell you that there are things that I will not do, and that you will have to find another instrument if you wish such work to be done. I leave my share to be set by Captain Morgan. He saw me in the inner fort, and he knows whether or not I have done my share of the fighting. Come, Jack!" And Oakes and I strolled off to the beach.

It was a week till the town was completely gutted, and when it was once done it did not need a second visit. It is no exaggeration to say that there was not ten shillings' worth of salable material in the town when we finally got the crews aboard the ships.

That last day in the plaza was a terrible one. I heard of it from Oakes, who had gone ashore. They were right glad to have some sober hands who were willing to remain aboard ship, so I heard no more of what Hetherington termed my insubordination.

For two days two hundred men, women, and children had been cooped up in the stone church with the doors locked on them without food or water, for the buccaneers forgot such trifles in their search for plunder till their ransom of ten thousand pieces of eight (pesos duros) had been paid, and

when the doors were finally opened and the people were released it was by no means a hundred that staggered into the sunlit plaza.

We weighed anchor early in the morning and headed back on our old course for the Isle of Cows and thence to the Tortugas, where the division of the spoil was made.

In cash and jewels, plate and bullion apart from the many little sums that many of the men had cached for their individual profit, the share of an ordinary sailor was about two thousand pesos, a larger booty than they had got in any previous raid.

No sooner was the division made than many of the men were for going to Jamaica, where in a civilized port they could get value received for their hard-earned money.

Several small boats left the settlement, but I noticed that the men who manned them were the looser living idlers who were not the backbone of the crews.

"They have some big game afoot, Stephen," said Oakes, nodding gravely at me. It was broached that night. Oakes and I were *matelots*, and lived in our little cabin that we had built of logs and canvas on the beach just above high-water line, where we had free access to the water. It was here that Captain Hetherington found us. He nodded curtly to me as I rose.

"Never mind, Upholme; I want to talk to Oakes there. Oakes, my man, have you ever handled a vessel?"

I laughed and Oakes explained.

"I want a navigator for first mate on the next trip. Will you take the berth? Three shares of prize money go with it."

In those days a captain drew five shares of the plunder, a mate three, and the rest of the crew one share each when the ships cruised alone.

Oakes demurred a little. "I didn't like that last affair, captain."

"Hang it, man! Who asked you to like it? This next one will be more to your taste, though."

"What is it, sir?" asked Oakes shortly.

Hetherington leaned forward as he answered quietly: "Savona and the plate-fleet."

Oakes looked at him admiringly. "Now that is something like a job for a man," he said. "My arm aches when I think of getting a Spanish soldier within sword-sweep, and Upholme here lacks a considerable sum of what they took from him. We will go, captain."

"Good! Keep your lips sealed till you get your orders. Good night," and he walked off to his own quarters.

Day by day we saw preparations hastened, and all that we saw convinced us that this was to be no common expedition. The larger vessels only were chosen, batteries were changed for heavier guns, new standing and running rigging was rove, spars were scraped and slushed, sails bleached, and no trifles were overlooked.

The crews were full, and the men were the best that even Morgan could get; and, indeed, they had need to be so, for this new venture, if Hetherington spoke truly, was indeed a great one.

The plate-fleet from the Havanas never passed without a heavy convoy, and those great galliases, with their tiers of heavy ordnance, were by no means a joke; though, to be sure, we cared but little for their guns if we could once grapple them stern and bow, for the buccaneers always counted a ship as won when they once set foot upon her decks.

So word went out by runner and by boat that Morgan was about to set out on a new venture, and again the men came crowding to him. Porto Bello, with its rich loot, had set fire to the imagination of every man along the coast, and they longed to again thrust their arms elbow deep in Spanish gold.

For that trip he had the pick of the hunters from Hispaniola. There were nine vessels that were to rendezvous at the old place, the Isle of Cows.

We left Tortugas in fine spirits and

ran down the coast gaily enough, hoping that some Spanish vessel along the coast would venture out into the jaws of the lion. None came, however, and we finally dropped our anchors in the little bay and waited for our consorts.

Day after day passed and the ships did not arrive. It was the hurricane season, and there had been much rough weather, which may have accounted for the delay; but, nevertheless, every day that passed lessened our hopes of intercepting the plate-fleet, and with it our chance of gaining prize-money.

Finally, seeing that no good could come of any further delay, Morgan called a final council. It was held on board of our vessel, and I was called upon to write down what took place.

Two small vessels were ordered to be left in the island to inform our consorts on their arrival to hasten north to Savona, whence we could make our attack on the Spanish convoy.

It was while that council was still in the cabin that, happening to glance through the windows of the open quarter-gallery, I saw the topsails of a large vessel showing above the horizon.

"There they come, gentlemen," I said.

I can see now those grim-faced fighting captains as they gathered in the quarter-gallery speculating upon the character of the incoming vessel. She swept in from sea a royal sight, with every stitch of canvas set alow and aloft, and bringing the sea-wind with her as she came.

Then very swiftly her yards were manned and every thread of canvas was furled as spontaneously as a bird folds her wings, in true man-of-war fashion. There was no singing such as is customary aboard merchant craft.

A big ship she was, of perhaps five hundred tons, and she was pierced for eight guns on a side in her main-deck batteries, besides heavy carronades upon her poop.

I saw Dillon—he was captain of the Bona Esperanza—smile into his beard as he watched the stranger come to an anchor.

No sooner had she brought up to her anchor than we had a boat in the water, and Morgan, with Dillon and Hetherington, were set aboard her. They were met by her captain, a French gentleman whose name I have forgotten, very polite as to his manner and most exquisite as to his clothes, whereby he might have given us lessons, and on his invitation they went down into the cabin.

I remained on deck so that I heard but little of what was said save such disjointed chatter as floated up through the open transoms.

"I can promise you," says Morgan, "good fighting if we meet the Spaniard, as well as gold and wine, for they carry both, if you will join us. You have a fine vessel, sir, and a large crew, and it is easy to see that they have been well trained."

"*Mais non, monsieur. C'est* impospossible. It cannot be. I am a privateer," replied the Frenchman with a bow. "And under special orders from my owners I am bound to enter into no partnerships nor to make any joint cruises save in European waters, and I am ordered to cruise for single vessels of the enemy. Not even to enter into free companionship with such a gentleman as yourself can I disobey my orders. Steward, bring wine and tobacco."

On the way back to our own ship the four captains fell silent, eying covetously the fine lines of the Frenchman and openly envying him his tiers of guns. With her to aid them, their chances would be increased from four to seven in ten.

As the boat swung up alongside the Black Prince and hooked on to her mizzen chains, Hetherington spoke in a low voice to Morgan.

"Send the boat back," he said, "and ask the officers of the Frenchman to dine with us to-night, and let some of our old hands go aboard of her to talk

to his crew of what we had at the taking of Porto Bello on the last raid."

Morgan's eyes gleamed as he gave the order, and I went below, feeling sure that trouble was brewing for the Frenchman.

The dinner given that night in the state cabin of the Black Prince began as a formal dinner, but ended as a wild carousal. Our officers came in state, every man clad in his best apparel; many wearing rings and golden chains, and using every pretext to talk of the last expedition, such as: "Yes, sir"—this was from Nettleton, the first officer of the Osprey—"the place was rich, and I had this"—pulling from his pocket a great gold watch as big as an apple which was literally encrusted with rich jewels—"to say nothing of seven thousand crowns."

This was true enough, for his *matelot* had been killed, so that Nettleton had both shares. "And for what? For sailing on a six days' trip over a summer sea, with two days' fighting thrown in at the end of it. Can you do better, *monsieur,* with a single ship?"

The Frenchman laughed and looked covetously at the rich jewelry that our men displayed. Four sentries clanked past me and took post by the door of the cabin, but I paid no especial attention to them, for I was trying to hear the talk at the far end of the table, where Morgan and the French captain were having high words.

At first I thought it was perhaps due to the wine that they had drunk, but a speech of Morgan's soon showed me that it was but a part of a well-concocted plan.

"No, *monsieur;* the case lies thus. I have been informed that you stopped an English ship upon the high seas and that you took from her certain stores of food and water—"

"I was short of both," broke in the Frenchman.

"You did not pay for them, *monsieur.*"

"I gave them bills of exchange upon my agent in Jamaica—"

"Aye, aye. So you did, but the agent promptly dishonored the bills, so the Englishman lost his goods and received no payment for them. Our two nations are at peace, and more than that, for both of them are at war with Spain. It was an unfriendly act, sir, which I will now give the chance to mend by coming with me on this venture!"

The Frenchman refused and sat back in silence. All talk had ceased about the table, and the four sentries who were in the cabin took post behind the Frenchmen.

Morgan leaned forward in his chair, a set smile upon his face. "Then, if you will not go, gentlemen, I must tell you that your ship goes, if necessary under our own officers. I shall be more than glad to entertain you gentlemen on board my own ship."

There was no possibility of mistake in his intention. The French officers swore excitedly.

"Send word aboard the Frenchman that their captain has changed his mind, and that they will join their fortunes with ours and sail with us at daybreak," said Morgan.

The news was received with cheers and shouts of approval, and there was no longer any doubt of the wishes of the French crew. It was evident that the men who had gone aboard the stranger to excite the cupidity of his crew by making a show of their own wealth had done their work well.

The revelry kept up till late, when the French officers were transshipped to Morgan's own ship, and it was two bells in the morning watch when I at last found my way to my cabin.

I had not got fairly into my berth when I was thrown violently off my feet by the thunder of a heavy explosion that seemed to heave the Black Prince bodily from the water.

A silence of even more frightful import followed; then a soft patter as of objects falling on our decks and in the water around us.

Horror-stricken, I sprang for the

quarter-gallery and looked toward the spot where Morgan's ship had lain the night before. There was a total blank, save for a mass of wreckage and a rift of white smoke that eddied and rippled along the surface of the sea.

Presently voices in the fleet began to hail, and a score of boats were on the scene. The ship had simply disappeared, though the officers — there were about thirty of them seated in the cabin at the time of the explosion — were unhurt.

But among the men the results were terrible. Over three hundred men were killed and wounded. For eight hours we hung around the spot. All that we got was the bodies of the dead.

Morgan and the officers had miraculously escaped. It was said that the explosion was caused by the French prisoners who had been imprisoned in the hold, but it always remained a well-defined belief that the real cause lay in the amount of liquor that had been consumed on board of the Black Prince earlier in the evening.

Daylight found another council gathered in the cabin of Morgan's new flag-ship. No possible good could come now from any further delay; for not only had we failed to increase our numbers, but we had greatly weakened our strength. We must get north to Savona without delay, that our consorts could meet us, so that we would be strong enough to meet the Spaniard; so sunset that night found us pressing northward under all sail through the Windward Passage.

The loss of our men was the first of a series of pieces of ill luck that befell us. No sooner had we dropped the Isle of Cows astern than we ran into bad weather. Head winds delayed us so that we were much longer than ever before in beating up through the passage, and in rounding Inagua, which we did in a gale of wind, the Black Prince carried away her foretopgallantmast, which delayed us yet more.

To make matters worse, the *boucan* that we had hastily prepared at Tortugas, spoiled, so that we were compelled to go upon short rations till the weather lifted and let us get more food from our consorts.

Savona had a good harbor, and glad we were to drop our anchors in the bay. It was here that we had our most grievous disappointment, for we now realized for the first time how hopeless was our plan of attacking the plate-fleet.

For a while I think that Morgan would not acknowledge even to himself that his plans had miscarried so badly, but when we found day after day passing and still no sign from the vessels that were to have met us there, we could easily see that the plan must be given up.

With only four hundred men we were simply not strong enough to venture our seven vessels against the fleet that we had hoped to overcome.

Moreover, it was very possible that the fleet had already passed in the same heavy weather that had at first delayed and now held us in Savona.

It was toward the end of the third week that word was passed for all the crews to gather ashore, so we came together in a great crowd on the beach, our officers sitting on the bank above us and the men gathered below them, by crews. When all were come Morgan stepped forward and addressed us.

"Well, men, our plans have miscarried. We cannot attack the plate fleet. The attack on Porto Bello has alarmed the whole coast and their treasures will be hidden. I have another plan to offer you. Many of you may remember my old plan to attack Havana. The country was raised against us, so it could not be carried out at that time. What do you say now to an attack on it from the west?"

The men looked doubtful.

He was wise enough not to press the point. It would have been impossible, of course, as he well knew, for he was shrewd enough, but it suited him for the time being to deceive us and it may be himself.

"Is there any one among you who has a better plan?" he asked.

I heard a muttering among the crew of the Sea Eagle behind me and presently a man was thrust forward by the men. He was a rough and unkempt looking scoundrel and he was most villainously dirty.

"*Si, señor,*" he said. "I have a word to say to which it may pay you to listen."

Interest quickened and the men crowded forward to see the speaker and to hear what he might have to say.

"I was one of L'Ollonois's men," he growled in a deep voice that sounded as though the salt winds of thirty years had played havoc with it; "and two years ago we took Maracaibo and Gibraltar and there may have grown some meat upon the bones that we picked so clean. I vote for Maracaibo and the southern coast. I know the ports, the forts, and the anchorage. I know the fortifications and I can take you there. I say Maracaibo and Gibraltar, with maybe Caracas to top off with if there are no Spanish ships of war there that are beyond our strength. There is gold there and wine and beautiful women, and there are good ransoms to be collected—"

I turned sick at heart, for I knew now that this was not to be an expedition in which we would war with men who were armed and as brave as we were, but rather a repetition of the Porto Bello affair, only on a larger scale. I said as much to Oakes. He shook his head gravely.

"I fear you are right, lad, and we must look out for a chance to leave them if we can."

But that chance never came, and well for me it was that it was so.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MARACAIBO RAID.

"We have made a bad bargain, Stephen," said Oakes moodily as we pulled aboard the bark. "We thought to reimburse ourselves by honest warfare, for it is honest now that there is war between the two countries; but now we find ourselves in a nice mess. We must find a way to leave them."

"Yes; but how?" I asked. "If we could but get a boat we might make for Jamaica; but we would be taking awful risks, and you know as well as I do what will happen should we fall into the hands of the Spaniards a second time. If Morgan would only touch at Jamaica on his way south we could leave him; but even he does not dare go through the Windward Passage again, now that the whole coast of Hispaniola has been ravaged.

"We were strong enough before to do as we pleased; we are not now. It does not need slate and pencil to do this sum: Are three hundred and sixty men as good as seven hundred? No, no. We must stay by them now till such time as we can leave them in an English vessel."

"And in the mean time," said my friend, "we are like to feel a pike in our backs in the first scrimmage if we are not as forward as they think we ought to be in robbing women and children. No, no, man! War is just and right, and privateering is right when two peoples are at odds.

"For nigh a hundred years we have been fighting Spain wherever we could meet her afloat or ashore, and I for one am not so squeamish but that I will take Spanish gold when I fall in with it in war times.

"We must make a hard and fast rule, you and I, Stephen, for the rest of this voyage. In fight with armed men we will do our best. In mere piratical raids for robbing defenseless towns and people we will hold our hands, and we will leave the Brethren of the Coast so soon as the opportunity comes to us."

And so it was agreed between us.

We ran southeast from Savona, looked in at our old anchorage in the Tortugas, where we took on board a

fresh supply of *boucain* and shipped a quantity of powder; but we found no men therein save only the small guard that we had left there to look after the place.

We got our anchors again and kept on down the coast, bearing up to the southwest, past Barbuda and Antigua, heading straight for the Golpho de Triste, and then westward along the mighty northern wall, more like Alpine peaks than any other mountains that I have ever seen.

Here and there the upland valleys opening through the wall of rock drew the eye up through the long vistas of mile on mile of cane-field and cultivated ground, with here and there along the coast patches of glaring white edged with bright green, showing the location of the thriving little Spanish towns.

I thanked Heaven that they were too small to be garrisoned, for the Spaniard only garrisoned his wealthy or important places, and had the places been rich they would have been helpless before us. I had no mind to see a repetition of Porto Bello.

"Up yonder, three thousand feet above the sea, is where Santiago de Leon was built." The thick, greasy voice made me shudder. It was the man who was now our guide, Pedro Corsona, the Spaniard. Oakes joined us by the rail.

"Yes, and I can tell you what Pedro probably does not know, that seventy-five years ago it was the scene of a most bloody battle, when it was taken by the English captain, Amyas Preston, with his crews. Lord, Lord! But it was rich, they say. It used to be the richest town east of Bogota."

"Maracaibo is good, too," said Pedro, licking his sinful lips at the thought.

Finally we raised the land. It was at evening when the word was passed, and in a moment the crews were grouped forward, glowing masses of color against the sheet of foam-flecked blue, and away off against the setting sun the shadow of a tall palm-tree rose out of the sea-rim and stood there in outline as hard as iron in the golden dusk.

From this time on discipline was most rigidly enforced. Gun-crews were told off, standing and running rigging overhauled, and what with sharpening of cutlases, tallowing of pikes, and setting new flints in the muskets, the time passed quickly enough till we had dropped Punto Gallinas astern and were drawing near the narrow pass that forms the opening to the wonderful landlocked bay of Maracaibo.

Here we found quiet water. Behind us was the roaring trade-wind and the open sea, and before us lay three thriving Spanish towns, helpless to our hands and absolutely unsuspicious of the fate that was in store for them.

The great headland that jutted seaward like the thumb from a man's hand was crowned by a large stone fort, the guns of which grinned menacingly at us to the seaward.

It would never do to leave such a place occupied by an enemy in the rear. The great golden flag of Spain flung out in a sheet of yellow flame from the headland.

Even then I remember that I thought we were too close under the walls to find safety from the heavy guns, when suddenly I saw Morgan's own ship lay her foretopsail to the mast.

The example was hastily followed by the other ships of the squadron, and in the twinkle of an eye twenty boats were in the water and the eager crews, not waiting for the boats to land, sprang over into the boiling surf that piled in smoky masses on the sea beach.

There were many trails, apparently mere cattle paths, that led from the sea beach to the rock-ribbed summit, where the bronze guns peered from their ports, and we took them at a run, never halting to form, but stumbling up the steep incline, man after man hauling himself up the hill by the

belt of the man ahead of him, till finally we came out upon the upper slope of the headland.

Still there was no volley from the walls! Breathless from our climb, taking advantage of every bit of cover, away we sped for the lowered drawbridge and the open gate that yawned cavernously at us from behind it.

Our charging line, supported by a second line of sharpshooters, stormed forward into the *terre-plein*. The empty casemates stared at us, and it was fully five minutes before we realized that the fort was empty.

The thought of loot was in every mind, and light itself is not quicker than was that crew of rascally gallants in scattering for plunder. Quick as they were, Morgan was still quicker.

Whipping out a pistol from his belt, he sprang in front of the leading group that was making for the chapel, where plate would be found if at all, and ordered them back into their ranks.

There was instant demurral, and he knocked the leader flat with the butt of his pistol.

"Back! Back!" he shouted. "Do you think the Spaniards love us so greatly that they mean to give us the key point to the town and to the bay? Stay where you are, you fools! 'Tis most likely that the place is but a trap! Two of you follow me.

"Hetherington, hold the rest of the men here in the open. Allow no man to eat food or drink wine that is found within the walls. 'Tis most likely that they have poisoned all that they have left behind! Come with me."

And the great red-coated figure rushed for the magazine.

I saw them halt near the door and I saw the two men who were with him leap back as Morgan threw his weight upon the door.

It broke under his rush and he plunged into the darkness and a moment later emerged with a lighted quick-fire burning between his fingers, his eyes ablaze with anger but his whole figure shaking with a fearful laughter.

"As I thought!" he roared. "The place is mined! Now, Hetherington come here!"

"The man is absolutely devoid of fear," said Oakes, who had been one of the two men who accompanied him.

"The mine had been laid and the charge set and the match that you saw him hold was already lighted and the spark was within three inches of an open powder barrel! A half-minute more and the whole mass would have exploded. He picked up the match with his naked fingers as you saw! What devilment are they at now, I wonder?"

"Ten men to go aboard each ship and bring them around the point," roared Morgan.

"Pedro—"

The Spaniard came forward.

"What guns are mounted in the fort yonder?" He pointed at the frowning mass of the fortification across the narrow channel.

"There were ten long twenty-fours mounted there two years ago, as well as five thirty-two-pounder carronades. They were there when L'Ollonois took the place—"

Morgan swore. Across the strait we could see the men running to quarters, and if ever those long guns were brought to bear upon our ships there could be but one result, for the angle was such that with the ill-constructed ports of those days, not a gun of our broadside could pitch its mouthful of iron into the fort.

"Get your men aboard, Mr. Oakes, and set the carpenter to work and rig a staging outboard clear along your sheer-strake on your larboard side. Do you understand, sir? Rig it clear from stem to stern on each of the ships and do it at once! Hasten!"

We hurried down the paths to the landing, and as we left I heard the word passed: "The town now! Forward to the town!" and glad I was that I had been assigned to the duty on board the ship.

I know what the next six hours

brought to Maracaibo, because I was at the sack of Porto Bello. During that six hours we had scarcely time to draw breath between the orders that were issued in quick succession while we worked upon the staging around the sides of the ship.

We had just completed it, ranging like a huge staging all around the larboard side when we heard hails and pistol shots ashore, and in quick response every vessel sent ashore her string of boats in tow of one of the number, which was rowed by five or six men.

Three hundred men had taken Maracaibo, but to our eyes and ears the crowd on shore seemed much larger, and it was not till the return of the boats that I saw what had happened.

Our boats were filled with men, women, and children, pale-faced and frightened, as well they might be, for they knew into whose hands they had fallen and they remembered L'Ollonois.

Like sheep they were hurried up the side, many of them hastened by pushes and blows from pikes and cutlases in the hands of their impatient captors. I saw one of the women stumble as she topped the rail and I sprang forward to aid her.

Swaying lightly as she reached the deck, crowded on one side by a burly, red-capped buccaneer and elbowed by a Spanish priest, she would have fallen had I not seized her firmly and by main force lifted her from the deck.

Even there amid the squalor and excitement of her surroundings, with the paleness of deadly fear upon her, she seemed to me the most beautiful woman I had ever beheld, the most perfect type of perfect Spanish beauty of the high Visi-gothic descent.

Tall she was and lissome as the river flag, and her hair had in it that golden glow that we sometimes see in the west at sundown; not unlike the sheen of a newly coppered ship when she sends forward through the green surges.

Her eyes were as blue as the blue waters of Albemarle when the purple light of evening flushes darkly across the reed-beds and long lashes that literally swept her cheeks.

I set her firmly on her feet and had a frightened "*Gracias, señor*" for my pains. The pursy Spanish priest behind her bustled forward officiously. "*Señora, señora,*" he began.

"Send the prisoners aft," shouted Hetherington from the break of the poop. They were driven aft like a flock of sheep.

As I saw them crowding together I could not help but note the girl—for she was no more than a girl—whom I had assisted and I turned to the priest. "*Como se llaman la señora alli?*" I asked pointing to her as I asked her name.

He drew back in terror.

"*Responde!* Answer me," I insisted.

"*La Señora de Montijo.* Ah, *señor!* for the love of God I ask your pity for her."

"What do you mean? Why should I do her harm?"

"They came and took us, to hold us to ransom. We have but little in goods of this world, but we who have gold will assuredly pay; but who is there to assure me that that lamb will escape? You have a mother, *señor?*"

I shook my head.

"A sister then?"

Again I shook my head in negation.

"There is then *una mas cara que ambos?*"

Dolores, thou canst tell now whether, in that, he did speak the truth. At that time I did not know what it was that had come to me when I took her hand to help her down from the rail, so I shook my head a third time.

"Her husband died a year ago, *señor,* and this very week she was to have sailed for the Havanas, where her father holds office under the Captain General Adelantado of all the Indies. She is young, *señor,* and beautiful."

His voice broke: "And thou I can

see art a *caballero* of blood. Wilt thou not promise me to befriend her? I have watched her grow up, and rather than see her come to harm, man of God as I am, I would drive a dagger through her heart. Promise me this, *señor!*"

I muttered something, I know not what, for the words were shouted out from the poop: "Range the prisoners out-board along the staging and seize their hands to the rail."

I could not believe my ears. This infamy was impossible. I saw the scheme now.

The fort on the eastern cape commanded the narrow passage, and the plan was to line the sides of the ships with the Spanish prisoners taken from the town so that through fear of injuring his own people the Spanish officer commanding the fort would let us pass in safety.

It was a devil's plan and it met with the fortune that so many plans of the devil do meet—it succeeded.

They sent a boat ashore with a single Spaniard, a prisoner, bearing a message to the commandant of the fort that if he fired on the ships, our prisoners would first of all be exposed to his fire and if we failed to pass then, they primarily, would suffer; and secondly, if in spite of the guns we should force a passage, then the prisoners would be compelled to draw lots that every tenth one should be hanged.

To the eternal credit of the Spaniard he agreed to the passage and I inwardly blessed him as, in spite of the verbal agreement, the prisoners were bound along the rail with their faces to the shore, so that in case the ships should be fired upon they should not lose any of the horror of it.

When I saw two men step forward toward the lady I had assisted, I motioned them away. I had not missed the look of terror in her eyes.

"*Señora! Señora,*" I said. "Will you do me the honor to allow me to do what I can to render your position less intolerable?"

She looked at me as one astonished at being so addressed.

"I assure you," I said, "I am not what I seem. At home I was a gentleman."

She smiled wanly. "Ah, *señor!* when one is a gentleman at home one is always a gentleman. What is it that I must do?"

"Take your place on the staging and stand facing outward. I will stand here and see that no harm happens to you."

"I thank you." She climbed bravely over the rail and took her stand among the white-faced prisoners, while I stood behind her ready at a moment to draw her in-board if they should fire from the fort upon the squadron.

Inch by inch and foot by foot we drew past the batteries, and at last we dropped down to the westward, and when dawn was slowly breaking in the east I heard the anchor of Morgan's ship, which was leading us, plunge into the water, our helmsman gave us a sheer to larboard to clear her; ship by ship the remainder of the squadron came up and the town lay helpless under our guns.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SACK OF MARACAIBO.

WHEN breakfast was done the crews were mustered on deck, and the boats were lowered into the water, and the prisoners were sent below, where a guard was placed over them.

As our captives went down the hatch-way I could not help hearing the remarks that were made anent the ransoms that were to be demanded for their release.

Men, women and children were openly appraised like so many animals, and until that day I never had the faintest conception of what a slave market could be like.

It was when Señora de Montijo passed me that Hetherington caught her roughly by the arm and demanded

her name. She had no more than answered him when I knocked up his hand with: "Prize of war, captain! She is mine. I claim her as my prize."

The men about us laughed. Hetherington was furious. I had seen the look in his eyes and I knew what it foreboded, and even then that had entered into my soul which made it impossible for me to stand aside in such a case.

"Prize of war," I said again. "Real treasure trove!"

He grinned at me maliciously. "What good will it do you, youngster, to claim as prize of war what you are not strong enough to keep? Like all else she will be sold and her ransom put in the common stock."

He stepped back and a moment later Oakes joined me. I was angry and I showed it and he laid hand upon my arm.

"Steady lad! Steady! Hetherington is a dangerous man—"

"Am I a child, Jack?"

"No, but he has made up his mind to have your Spanish beauty and I'm thinking that her ransom will be a heavy one and—maybe—not all—paid in gold—"

"Then listen, John Oakes! As God is my judge I tell you only what I mean word for word, thought for thought, intent for intent! The man who lifts hand against that girl, I will run through the body, if it were King Charles himself. Captain, mate or buccaneer I will kill him as I would a mad dog."

I think I must have managed to impress Oakes with the fact that I meant every word of what I said, for he stood a moment with his arms akimbo, nodding gravely at me.

"Aye," he said. "Sits the wind in that quarter? Then, Stephen, we will need to keep our weather eyes open. Caution the lady to keep below and to stay as much as she can where she will not be seen. What is her name?"

I told him in a low voice, adding thereto: "No man can see the end of this affair, Oakes, but I give you my word of honor that come what may I mean every word of what I told you a moment since."

"And so did Hetherington or I mistake him! Do you think that you, a mere boy of twenty-two, can come down here on your first freebooting cruise and beard an old buccaneer captain? He has raided and ravaged all the coast. I tell you, man, you need to keep your weather leeches lifting. Mind what I tell you! There goes the bo'swain piping the boats away. Mind you tell the lady to keep below and as far from the well of the hatch as she can."

I caught the combings of the hatch and swung myself down into the 'tween-decks and thence into the hold, where I soon routed out the Spanish priest, to whom I told the advice that Oakes had given me, and then I scurried back again to the decks to find that the men in the boats were swearing at me for causing the delay.

It was a mad race to Maracaibo with the hard-bitten rascals panting on their oar-looms as they sent their light craft swirling up the shingle, letting loose upon the doomed city three hundred of the greatest ruffians that the world has ever seen.

Shouting, swearing, raving, they swept up the streets from the *muella* to the plaza where the great church opened its doors to all. Little heed did they pay to aught save the desire for gain.

The silver work on the altar was pried or wrenched loose from the wood-work, and as I turned away I saw two of our own crew of the Black Prince struggling with each other with bared knives for the possession of a great golden pyx.

The gutters ran with wine, for the Spaniards were a luxurious people in the tropics, though hardy and virtuous enough at home. Men, women and children were herded into the plaza, and finally, when there seemed no further chance of getting gold or jewels

given by the people, the entire crowd of luckless prisoners was ruthlessly forced into the great stone church and the doors were closed upon them.

An hour later the prisoners were brought from the vessels of the squadron and were placed with their unfortunate friends in the church, and the town was given over to sack and pillage.

What I had seen at Porto Bello was but child's play when compared with what I now saw at Maracaibo. The place had been ravaged two years before by the Frenchman L'Ollonois and it was an old saying among the Brethren of the Coast that where L'Ollonois had been it was ill gleaning.

Everything that was of any value at all was carried off. Plate was stolen, silver and gold as well as priceless paintings were carried off from the cathedral to which they had been given by pious Spaniards at home.

Clergy and laity alike were stripped of every peso that they owned and the words of the Psalmist, "*nudus intravi, nudus exeo,*" seemed indeed come true for the doomed town.

There was no rate of ransom absolutely fixed for the prisoners who had fallen into our hands. One captain, in the heat of the sack, would demand a thousand pesos for the safety of an individual, and after taking the money would promptly turn the man loose to be picked up by the next buccaneer to whom he looked promising.

When no more money was to be extorted by threats they also were confined in the church with the others, where they were placed under a heavy guard, while detachments of the ships' crews pillaged systematically for food, wine, and clothing.

Our men were to be seen on every hand, staggering to and fro, up and down the streets, loaded with the most motley burdens of loot—women's finery, church regalia, porcelain masterpieces and choice paintings, cases of wine—while barrels of French brandy were rolled into the open plaza, where they were broached for the lawless crews.

Beauty, too, paid toll. None were too high for insult or too low for extortion. Sickened of it all I turned to Oakes.

"Jack! You said that these men were such as Drake—"

"Aye, I did, God forgive me for the words or for mentioning him in the same breath with this godless set. Look yonder, Stephen! There goes your man! 'Tis Hetherington—"

He was walking slowly across the plaza, and I think that he had no idea that on such a night when the whole town was open to sack that any person would be interested in what he did or where he went.

We followed him up the street that led to the church and in the half light I distinctly saw him pass some money to the sentry who was standing in the shadow of the arched doorway. The heavy door opened and I heard him call: "Señora de Montijo!"

I instantly stepped behind the heavy stone buttress and drew Oakes after me, for I had no desire to have Hetherington see us till I was assured of his purpose. From our position near the door we could hear everything that was said.

She was very white and wan when she appeared at the entrance, and when she saw Hetherington she stopped dead and half turned toward the church as if she would reenter it.

My heart leaped at the mere sight of her in all her golden beauty and my throat tightened till I could scarcely swallow. Suddenly in the passing of a heart-beat I knew what her presence meant to me and the blood surged up to my temples in a flood of passion.

Then came the thought, "What a fool you are, Stephen Upholme! What will she, a beautiful Spanish woman (who are among the proudest on earth) have to do with you—you, a common, buccaneering rascal, as she looks at it, whose hands are stained

with the blood of her friends and perhaps her relatives? You are a fool."

Hetherington's voice broke in on my thoughts. "Well, *señora!* Art thou ready to pay thy ransom at the sum that the council will place upon thee? It will be five thousand pieces of eight if I have my say, by very reason of your beauty. It will be well to pay it promptly, for they do not like to wait."

"But indeed, *señor,* I have no such sum, nor have my friends. They have all been mulcted, to say no worse, of what they have to save their own lives. I cannot pay the fourth part of the sum that you have mentioned. If I were given time I can get it from the Havanas where my relatives are, but in this place I have not an hundred pesos—"

"Do not say that, *señora.*" I could see his evil smile as he said it. "Do you know what is customary in such case?"

"How should I know? All my life I have lived among *caballeros* and ladies. Never before have I had aught to do with thieves and murderers."

How I loved her for the taunt! Involuntarily I reached for my sword-hilt.

He stamped his foot angrily. "That will not help you, *señora,*" he said. "It is the custom that if the ransom be not paid within the time that is taken in the auction—for it is no less—then the prisoner is sold in public as a slave. You can see the choice that is open to you. Yet I am willing to give you the money with which to pay your ransom if in return you will be married to me by the priest before we leave."

She drew herself up haughtily. "Marry a pirate? A picaroon? A sea-thief? Better die a thousand deaths," she said.

"Aye, that may be, too. It is quite easy to believe that a time may come in the near future when you will envy those who have died here. You have your choice, *señora,* to marry me or—"

In her pure presence even he paused, and I felt Oakes's hand press heavily on my shoulder as I leaped out from the shadow of the stone buttress and accosted Hetherington.

"It is a bad time, Captain Hetherington, to let the prisoners be abroad. If men did not know us they might say, indeed, that we were trying to make some private gain out of it."

I saw at once that this must be my tone, so that the onus of the quarrel that I knew must come should be cast upon him lest it should be said that I, a green youngster, was trying to carry things with a high hand, and I well knew how this feeling, if started, would interfere with me.

His hand dropped to his sash, but before he had time to draw, Oakes had his wrist in a grip of iron.

"None o' that, captain," he said. "It will not go down with us. We are gentlemen adventurers, not your longshore French pirates who will thrust a knife through any man, even their best friends, for a pint of brandy. Keep your hand off your pistols, I say, or by Heaven! I'll drive three feet of cold steel through you."

Hetherington paused, as well he might, and the girl shrank back against the closed door. It may have been fancy, but I thought I saw a look of relief dawn in her eyes when she saw us.

"What the devil do you want?" growled Hetherington.

"You to keep away from the church and not to interfere with the guard," said Oakes in a determined tone.

The lady broke in here with: "Have I been insulted enough and may I rejoin my friends now inside the building? Or is some further insult intended?"

Oakes turned to Hetherington and I signed to the guard to open the door. "*Señora,*" I said, bowing over her hand and speaking in a low voice, "you may count upon me. Rough as I am, I will be drawn by wild horses before I will let harm come to you."

She looked at me in surprise and wonderment and I went on:

"I told the priest last night on board ship that come what may I will do what I can to aid you and to insure your safety. I would like you to be able to say, when you have returned home in safety, that all Englishmen whom you have met are not thieves and murderers. Will you trust me?"

"I cannot help it," she whispered in reply. "I cannot help it. I must trust you, *señor*. What would you have me do?"

"Go inside the church and get as far from the door as may be, and do not come out if you can help it till you hear from me. I will do what I can and if there is a chance to save you I will move heaven and earth to do it."

I opened the door and passed her in, and as it clanged into place behind her Hetherington turned to me with an evil look.

"This is the third time, youngster, that you have interrupted me. What do you mean by it?"

"That that lady is my prize of war," I said hotly, "and that I will permit no interference with my rights by you or any other man, even Captain Morgan himself. I am a gentleman adventurer and I claim my right as one of the Brethren of the Coast to take my own prize in my own way—"

"And add it to the common stock," he said quickly. "But you shall pay. Oh, yes, you shall pay to the uttermost farthing, and sooner or later you shall give me satisfaction."

"No time like the present," I retorted, lugging out my sword. "Stand in guard, sir!"

A pistol shot in the plaza interrupted us. "Come on," said Oakes, shortly; "the men are gathering for the collection of the ransoms. The matter is not in your hands now if there is any question of your having actually taken the prize."

The men were gathered in the great open square of the town and in front of the groups were placed the great piles of loot, money, silks, and plate, and behind the stolen wealth of the town were ranged the long lines of the prisoners to whom were now added the unhappy inmates of the church.

I sought for Señora de Montijo, but at first I could not find her, and for a while I consoled myself with the thought that in the darkness she might have escaped in the crowd.

One by one the piles of wealth were apportioned to the ships' crews, by whom the allotment to each man was to be made, and when the loot had been divided the cry went up from a red-shirted buccaneer:

"Now for the prisoners and their ransoms!" And one by one they were brought forward.

Standing before the gathered crews, they were told collectively that the ransom for each man would be a thousand pesos and for each woman, two thousand. This was general, but where a man was known to be wealthy or where a particularly beautiful woman was in the case the ransom was raised.

Many found the sums after haggling over the payment. Many could not pay and were passed over in slavery to their masters who had captured them, the amount of their ransoms being deducted from the share that their owners were to receive.

It was not until nearly all had been disposed of that I saw the girl step forward as her name was read from a slip of paper. Both Hetherington and I also stepped forward, with Oakes close beside me.

"I claim this woman," said Hetherington sharply. "She is my prize. Taken by me and held aboard my ship."

"To be ransomed," read the man who held the paper, in a singsong voice, "at five thousand pesos."

"I cannot pay it," she said in a tone that would have melted the hearts of any but those men.

"In default of payment, she is adjudged as prize of war to—" He hesitated.

"She is mine," I said. "And I surrender my right to no man."

Hetherington sprang toward me, but Oakes shoved him back so that he nearly stumbled into the fire. The men about us laughed. It was not the first time that they had seen beauty cause a fight.

"I will give my share," I said, "and what I have at Tortugas. It amounts to two thousand pesos."

"Not enough," said one of the captains.

"Take my share, Stephen," said my *matelot*, "I have fifteen hundred."

"Not enough," grinned the captain again. "You must pay for your prize, my son."

"Let them play for her," suggested one. The proposal was received with a shout of acclamation.

"Let us fight for it," I said. I had not missed the look of terror in her eyes. I have never been lucky at games of chance but I knew my own skill with the sword.

"No. No. A good sword hand shall not be lost to us, as it will be if they fight, for no matter who wins we still lose a man. Bring the dice."

They were brought and passed from hand to hand about the fire. I looked at the girl standing there with the firelight casting shadows on the bright gold of her hair. She covered her face with her hands and burst into an agony of weeping.

"Diced for like a common slave," she said. "I can not endure it! In honor give me a pistol or a knife. It is the better way!"

Another roar of laughter interrupted her. Oakes nudged me.

"You cannot fight the crowd," he said. "Not even the two of us back to back could make head against them. Take the dice, man. It is your only chance."

Mechanically I took the four bones and threw. Two aces, a five and a four was all that showed as they lay upon the red cloak that some one had laid upon the ground.

The girl's face was tense and white as she followed the movements of my hand. Hetherington grinned evilly as I passed over the box and the men crowded closely around the cloak on which we threw.

"One—two aces—a five—and—yes, it is, by Heaven! It also is a four."

A gasp went up from the ring of bearded faces. If excitement was what they wanted they had enough of it and to spare. He handed me the dice for the throw that was to settle the question, and I threw.

"An ace—a six and two fives!"

It was a poor throw and I saw the smile of pleasurable anticipation that he gave as he gathered the dice in his great fist for the cast.

But that throw was not to be made, for as he took them in his hand a great, drunken ruffian reeled across the fire and slapped his fist down upon Hetherington's shoulder.

"A fair game," he called out. "A fair game, comrade, and a fair prize to the winner," and the dice fell all over the cloak and disclosed four twos.

Hetherington cursed and struck me across the face with his open hand.

The blood rushed hotly to my head, and a great mist rose before my eyes as I seized my sword and jammed the iron hilt with all my force against his mouth.

"Your life for that," he panted.

"If you can take it!"

They could not refuse the fight to me under this provocation. A blow always meant a fight under the code of ethics of the Brethren of the Coast and they clamored about us madly as they formed a ring around the fire.

"Stand to it, lad," said Oakes. "Keep your weather gage and board!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Hetherington was upon me, and quick of foot as I was in those days I found that I had my hands full to keep his sword point from my throat.

Once, twice, he lunged with the ease of a practised swordsman, but his

point shot back so quickly into the defense that I had no chance for an opening. The third time I had the point through my upper arm.

Not for nothing were those years of my boyhood spent with men who had fought and bled on all the hard-fought fields of Europe. Quick as a flash, I passed my sword into my left hand, and before he had recovered his guard I thrust *en carte*, following the thrust with the full weight of my body.

It was a reckless thing to do, for it threw me open to his return thrust if I failed to reach him, but I did not fail. As it happened the point caught him fairly under the right arm and drove deep into his body, and the blade snapped as he fell upon it.

A roar rose to the stars and Oakes whirled me back as I was about to spring upon him, *misericordia* in hand, to demand his surrender, for among the Brethren of the Coast only an acknowledged defeat counted.

"You have won," he said. "You have won! Now take your prize and leave. Leave," he said shortly. "I will follow to guard your back."

I stepped forward and spoke to the shuddering girl.

"*Señora*, I kiss your hands and feet. Tell me where we shall find some friends of yours, for you must seek them to get shelter in some place where you will not again be exposed to danger of capture."

She looked at me uncomprehendingly. I repeated my words.

"Do you mean," she said slowly, "that I am free?"

"As free, *señora*, as you were before we came," I said.

She looked me long in the eyes and my heart leaped at the joy of it. "Come then, *señor*," she said. "I know a place, but you must take me to it. God guard you, *señor*, for your chivalry."

Oakes following us closely, I took her hand and led her out from the brawling and drinking men, through the roaring, ranting groups about the fires, out into the golden tropic night and the coolness of the stars.

CHAPTER IX.

THE REAL TREASURE.

It was not till we had passed the district in which the more pretentious residences were built that we slackened our pace. During all this time, perhaps a half-hour, neither of us had spoken, but all the while I had held her little hand in mine.

"*Señor*," she said presently, "what is thy name?"

I told her.

She stumbled prettily over the "Stephen," finally laughing when I translated it into the softer "Esteban" of the Castilians.

"My own name is Dolores," she said; "Dolores de Montijo, and—oh, Don Esteban, you have been so good to me; I can never thank you enough! Almost do I wish that you were more like those men back there, so that I might feel that I could recompense you by money for what you have done. That is, if I had it."

"I am repaid already," I said, "in knowing that I have redeemed myself in your eyes. Indeed, when we came on this raid, or, rather, when we joined the freebooters in Tortugas, we were fresh from the prison of San Marco."

And I told her how we were cast away in the Lone Star, of the prison, of the torture of Oakes, and of our escape.

"Is it then revenge that brings you to war on defenseless people?" she asked.

"Long ago I swore," I said, "that my sword should never be used against the helpless. Soldiers of Spain robbed me and tortured my friend, and against them we will do our best. Helpless men and women are safe from me."

"Oh, Don Esteban," she said, "you have shown me that."

Her warm little hand dropped into mine again, and I thought—perhaps it

was but a thought—that she colored as I raised it to my lips.

"I am repaid a thousand times by that," I whispered. I could distinctly hear Oakes chuckling in the darkness behind us.

"Where do you wish to go, Doña de—"

"Dolores," she said demurely.

"Dolores," I said very slowly, that I should catch the full flavor of it. "Where do you wish to go?"

"Out beyond the edge of the town, toward the forest. Our people fled in that direction, and it must be that they have taken to the hills and the country, where your men cannot find them. We will meet some one before we have gone very far, and I am known to all. How long will these — these *piratas* stay in town, Don Esteban?"

"Till they have got every peso and emptied every bottle," I said bitterly.

"And then, I suppose, Gibraltar will share our fate." She did not ask a question; she merely stated a self-evident fact.

"What will you do, *señor?* You cannot go with them! You have shown me very clearly that you are not of them, though your fate has thrown you among them. What will you do? Leave them, Don Esteban! Leave them!"

"On a hostile coast, when they need every sword-hand? Bad as these men are, Doña Dolores, yet they saved our lives. And even if I could leave them, what would happen to me should I happen into the hands of the Spaniards? You know right well. If king's officers would torture helpless seamen to get information from them on mere suspicion of being accomplices of the Brethren of the Coast, what would these people here in Maracaibo, whom we have looted, do? A long drop and no priests would be the only favor that they would be likely to grant."

"You have saved me," she said softly; "and I am not unknown among them."

"But there are many, Doña—Dolores—who were not saved and who are even now aboard the ships, calling to God in their misery!"

I must have spoken as I felt, strongly, for she burst into weeping, and in a moment, before she had even the chance if she had the desire to remonstrate, I had taken her in my arms.

"Dolores, Dolores!" I said. "Thou are the brightest star in all the Southern skies. This raid of mine, with all of its attendant cruelty and bloodshed, war, and disaster, is well worth while, for it has made me know you. To have known you is better than a king's ransom, and to have seen you, to have heard the music of your dear voice, is like water to a thirsty land."

She pulled away from me, I thought indignantly, and I half regretted the wild vehemence of my words. What earthly use was there in speaking? Though, indeed, I was in that case when a man simply speaks without thought of what the outcome may be. What right had I to annoy her? I, a mere gentleman adventurer, of a foreign race, and looked on by her people as a pirate! A flood of hot shame flushed over me.

"I am sorry—" I began.

"For what you have told me? Fie, Señor Esteban! That is not said prettily! That is not the saying of a *hidalgo,* Es-te-ban—"

"No, no! Never sorry for what I told you; but sorry for the mad folly that led me to speak of it. Is it not enough that I, a mere adventurer, have come here and in the time that I have been here have fallen in love so hopelessly with you? Oh, yes, I will speak the truth now, if I never do it again—"

She held up her hand in protest.

I went on:

"Oh, yes, I did, Dolores, that very first evening, when you came aboard my ship and when I knew that I would give my immortal soul to be of service to you. I say, is not this bad enough? But I must needs annoy you by telling you of it like some schoolboy who

must tell the first axiom that he learns!"

"Having first saved my life and my honor, which is dearer than my life," she said softly. "Look! Are not those men yonder? They should be some of my friends."

We had passed the landward gate of the city and were very near the edge of the forest that spread for miles and miles, a great blanket of blackness, lighted here and there at night by myriads of fireflies that wove in and out, showing in the dusk like golden thread in a velvet robe.

The moon was very near her setting, and in the half-light I saw two men step forward into the white path of the roadway.

Dolores went forward and spoke to them, and after a parley of a few minutes the three came toward us. I can see them now as they came—one an old man, gray-bearded and leaning on a half-pike, the other a burly fellow, bearded and heavily armed.

"*Señores,*" said the elder man, "in the name of all of us I thank you for what you have done this day. We had no suspicion of the coming of Captain Morgan till we had word from our outpost on Le Espada of the coming of his ships, which had been seen before off Caracas. Tell me, *señores,* when will these ships sail?

"We have old men, and women, too, and children with us here in the dampness of the forest, who have been driven homeless from the town and who, till the town is abandoned, must live like the beasts of the field. When can we return in safety, *señores?*"

Oakes struck in. "I think that thy people can return in safety when you wish. It depends largely upon the answers that you give to our questions. We are two Englishmen, who are not well known to the Brethren of the Coast, and our voices are not heard in the councils. We are mere ciphers in the count. Moreover, we are resolved to quit the game; but if they should hear from us on our return that Gibraltar has been burned by its own inhabitants rather than fall into our hands—"

"What is that, *señor?* Can this be true?" The old man was greatly excited.

"Who said it was true?" demanded Oakes. "But they will not wish to visit a burned town. I know nothing of it. If, I say, they should hear that the town has been burned and that there is no hope of loot there—why, it might hasten their departure."

I saw his plan. If these people could get news to Morgan of the destruction of Gibraltar, it was barely possible that the vessels would not go down the lake to investigate the matter.

As it turned out, it was bad advice, and we were to regret for years and years that we ever suggested it.

The old man stroked his beard thoughtfully for a moment. "It is a good plan. Wait here a moment, if you please."

He left the four of us standing at the edge of the forest, and in a few moments he reappeared with another man.

"This man," he said, indicating his companion, "will accompany you and will give the message that he has been told. Pedro"—turning to the man—"tell the *señores* what thou hast heard."

"All is desolation." The voice was a curious one, so flat and hopeless it was, and so deadly monotonous in tone. "Houses burned and wealth carried away. Men and women have taken to the woods and hills, and the fires were licking up the houses and the gathered crops. Oh, the fine city that took so long in the building—"

He began to weep in a maudlin way, and the thought came to me that he was drunk.

"It is a bad time, surely, for a man to drink overmuch," I said.

"He is not drunk, *señor.* He was a sailor years ago, and nearly died of *vomito prieto* — yellow fever — in the

Havanas. Since then he has never been quite as sound in his mind as he was before, and he always talks of the burning of Quiberon.

"If it happens that he gets excited, as he often does when the subject of the talk is wealth, then he becomes unintelligible and can tell no more than he has been told. He will tell the tale as I have told it to him, and if Captain Morgan believes it you will have the consolation of knowing that you have saved many lives this night.

"By the time that you can reach Gibraltar, if indeed you go there, the place will indeed be deserted; but the tale may save it from being burned."

Oakes nodded gravely in acquiescence. "It may work. We will return now to the town, for it will never do to have ourselves suspected. Come, Upholme!"

But I had stepped aside and was speaking in a low tone to Dolores. "Señora," I said, "Doña—Dolores—I am about to leave you now. Will you think once in a while of the poor English adventurer who, in spite of the harm that he has done, did what he could to help you? The best thing that I can ask at this time is that you forget it all; but I pray that with the years that come forgiveness will come also—"

"Forgiveness cannot come," she said slowly, "till wrong is conceded to have been done. Señor—Esteban—I shall—never—forget. And—and—"

The white hands flung out to me. "Esteban, I do not wish to do so."

"Come on, Stephen! Are you a fool?" growled Oakes, and with many a backward glance I followed him down the road.

We had not gone a hundred yards, closely followed by our companion, when I heard footsteps behind me, and the old man called to us in the darkness:

"It is naught, *señores*. I am to tell Señor Upholme that a message for Señora de Montijo will always be received by her if it is sent to the care of Angelo Cabrera in Maracaibo. *Buenos noches*," and the sound of his footsteps died away.

CHAPTER X.

"FOOL'S GOLD!"

THE dawn was breaking in the east, as only a tropic dawn can break, when we reached the landing. Boats were putting off in all directions for the ships, and our men were scattered along the beach, each laden with his accumulation of plunder, waiting an opportunity to place it in safety on board of his ship.

We went to the spot where we had left our boat, and were immediately hailed by a shout from a party of our men. Oakes told them at once that he wanted a boat to take us off to Morgan's ship, and at length, after some demurring, we got a crew to row us.

Morgan himself was pacing the weather side of the quarter-deck when we boarded her, and he hailed Oakes at once.

"Well, Oakes, who have you there?"

He looked curiously at Pedro, who accompanied us.

Oakes pushed the Spaniard forward.

"Here is a man, captain, who says that he has come from Gibraltar, and that the place has been destroyed—"

"What is that? Send him here at once!"

He paused in his walk and swung to and fro above us with the sway of the ship on the water. "Who is he?"

"A man, captain, whom Upholme and I picked up last night in our wandering about the town and have brought to you, because he may be able to give you information of some value that will save us a dangerous delay. He says that he has come from Gibraltar—"

Morgan gazed intently at him, and the man cringed at the poop-railing.

"Tell me, what size garrison did you see in the town?"

"Four hundred men, *señor*, but they are not there now—"

"How many forts defend the entrance?"

"Two, *señor,* but they are empty now."

"Empty—yes, with mined passages and the fuses lighted like the fort up yonder."

"No, *señor*—you are in error. The men did not wait. It is a long road to La Guayra, and they did not go with empty hands."

"What do you mean, you rascal—is the town deserted?"

"Do rats stay by a sinking ship, your honor? When they heard two days ago of the fate of Maracaibo they did not wait, lest worse befall them. If this fort here could not delay you, is it likely that an inland town could long resist? If this garrison could not make itself good against you, what chance has a smaller garrison? No, no, *señor,* the town is deserted."

The tale that I had been told of the craziness of the man before me seemed to me utterly unfounded. His eyes were steady, his face calm, his demeanor grave and sedate. He was in truth playing his part too well, if it was a part that he was playing.

"But you," said Morgan shortly—"How came you here?"

"I was fishing on the lake when I saw them set the torch to my house. It is not in human nature, *señor,* for a man to love those who injure him. I would like to see the houses of the others burned now, but it is not to be. There is naught there now to pay you for a visit to the place. I came to my old master, Angelo Cabrera, who, in old days, owned a carrack that traded to Vera Cruz."

"Was there much wealth in Gibraltar?"

The word was the keynote to the weak point in the character of the man if Morgan had but known it.

"Pieces of eight," he shouted. "*Pesos duros* in heaps and piles till a man could bury his elbows in the money, and sacks of bullion laden on fifty asses. Silks in great bales brought there from the King of Tartary, his kingdom, and ropes of pearls from Margarita. Oh, the red wine that they destroyed and the red flames licking through the mass of it—"

His voice trailed off into nothingness.

Morgan's eyes gleamed evilly. "Take him below," he said, "and fire a gun to leeward to recall the crews. I never saw a harvest gathered yet but that there was good gleaning."

The gun roared out across the water, and, in immediate response, boat after boat put off from the beach and, under the impetus of the brawny arms, leaped across the brine.

"God help the man," said Oakes—"He told too much! The Spaniard was led below, where he was promptly ironed to a ring-bolt on a gun-traverse. He has overdone his part," said Oakes again.

"It was that mention of wealth that did it," I replied moodily. "He was sane enough till that was mentioned. I suppose he is possessed with a devil on that one subject. I have seen them before."

Orders were promptly given for three of our seven vessels to remain at Maracaibo and to place a part of their crews as a garrison in the stone fort on the headland to hold it, while Morgan, with the remaining four ships, was to sail at once for Gibraltar.

If the town was actually as wealthy as the man said, then there would surely remain some good pickings. So it was that the flag-ship and three others got up their anchors and sailed for the lower end of the bay.

Badly wounded as he was, Hetherington insisted upon being carried on board of his ship, where he was installed in his cabin, and, swathed in bandages though he was, yet he still refused to relinquish actual command till the work should really become too hard for him to perform.

To give him full credit, he was as brave as a lion, and when a man was rated as brave in that horde of hard-

bitten fighters, it was no slight testimony to his valor.

It was not over seventy-five miles to the far end of the lake, but it took us two days, what with the shoal water and the light winds, so that it was late in the afternoon when we sighted the anchorage of the town wherein lay a couple of small Spanish galleys.

There was no sign of any fire in the town, and there were no men aboard the galleys, and I heard many muttered doubts of the truth of the story that had been told us. Oakes stepped up to the rail where I stood, looking landward.

"I see no sign of any people, Stephen," he said. "I wonder if they have had time at Maracaibo to send word to them here. The place looks deserted. It may be that Pedro's story, in all save the wealth of the place, is true, after all."

There was no sign of life aboard the black hulks of the galleys, and a boat's crew sent aboard them returned with the news that the guns were spiked and the powder had been flooded, so with a word of caution about not drinking wine that was in open or in newly sealed bottles, the boats were once more lowered and they raced for the beach, each man afire with the hope of gaining some jewel that he could secure and hide or with fear lest some one else should reach the shore before him.

Wounded as he was, Hetherington was still our captain, and he issued his orders through Oakes, and I knew right well that when he should recover, as the doctor said he would, he would not spare me if it should happen that it came his way to do me harm.

Word must have been received from Maracaibo of the plight of that town, for there was no sign of any living human being in the streets or in the houses, and the sound of our shouts and footsteps echoed hollow from the walls.

It was a large town, and we had but one-half of our force, so we proceeded systematically to examine the place.

A heavy guard was thrown out on the far side of the town in order to prevent surprise, and for five days patrols were daily told off to raid the houses and to search for loot and any hidden treasures that they might find.

They might have saved themselves the trouble, for after five days' search they did not find a single peso! Finally some one suggested that the Spaniard be liberated and used as a guide to the treasure that he had talked of so glibly. He was set free, and they gave him the run of the town for two days, at the end of which time he promptly disappeared.

The men swore at each other for their folly in losing the only person who knew anything of the town, but at the end of the fifth day the man returned, worn-out and hungry, and he was again confined, this time without the rough laughter with which they had formerly accosted him.

With the hope of rich plunder ahead, laughter had been easy; with the certainty of failure and the prospect of being jeered at by their comrades in Maracaibo who had escaped the extra work entailed by the trip to Gibraltar, all gentleness fell from them and even the fool did not escape.

"Bring him up! He knows! Make him talk and compel him to pilot us to the place where they have buried their goods! He has seen it, and he must know."

"He lied once about the burning of the town," said Oakes, anxious to save the poor fellow. "He may be lying again. I doubt if he is sound in his upper works." Oakes touched his forehead commiseratingly.

Jenkins, who was standing near us, laughed. "Oh, he's sane enough," he said. "I gave him a peso duro—a silver dollar—a while ago, and he pouched it as quick as a monkey does a banana. There is no question of his sanity."

They cast loose his irons and brought him up on the deck, where the crew had gathered. He looked half-witted

now indeed as he stood in the full light of the glaring tropic noon with his fallen lower lip and drooling mouth.

I think in that moment that even Morgan had his doubts, for he looked at the man and then threw him a dollar. He snapped it up as a dog seizes a bone and growled out a "*Gracias, Señor Capitan.*"

"Dost thou know where there is treasure hidden?"

The man gave him a cunning look. "There is much hidden that shall not be revealed," he answered.

"Do not trifle with me, fellow. Thy life hangs on thy answer! Jenkins, take forty men of your crew and take him as your guide. Make him pilot you to the place where the 'blunt' has been hidden and bring it back with you. Bring it back, I say, or you know what you can expect from me.

"Here we are with four days lost to us through following up this old wives' tale, and the Spanish armadas only three days off at La Guayra, where they can head us off at any moment if word should have been sent to them of our plight. Be quick, man!"

It was the first command that Jenkins had ever held, which may have accounted for the way he drove us. Oakes, being to all intents and purposes captain aboard the Black Prince, could not go with us; so Jenkins was selected, and it was a very determined party of forty men that rowed ashore on that fifth day with the Spaniard to guide us.

We marched out of the town and picked the best of our way behind our guide as he led us up the bed of the stream that supplied the water to the town. We crossed it above the walls and struck down again from the line of the hills to the low banks of the lake.

The hills had dwindled away now to a horrible waste of mangrove swamps, where mile after mile of interarching roots stretched their foul arms, dank with slime, to take fresh root in the fouler mud below.

Colonies of great purple crabs wove in and out among the roots, and here and there a tall white heron stood spectral-like among the mangrove stems.

All day we tramped along, moving carefully across the mud or swinging ourselves, like so many monkeys, from root to root, till, as night was falling, we reached firm earth at the far side of the swamp and camped for the night.

Tired and exhausted with the long march and the unwonted exertions, we gathered about the fires, seeking the lee of the blaze so that the smoke should drive away the pestilential mosquitoes that infested the wet lands.

"See here, Pedro," said Jenkins angrily when the guide had been led up to the fire to be questioned, "do you know where this treasure is hidden?"

"*Sí, señor.*"

"What is it? Gold or silver? Minted pesos or bullion, or mayhap precious stones? What is it, and where is it hidden?"

"Gold," he said—"gold, *señor,* and silver; but I will not tell. Why should I? And colored stones such as no man ever saw before. I buried them, but not for you. No, no—I will never tell!"

"Oh, that is your song, is it? Very well! I will show you that you will tell, and be very glad for the chance of telling, too. You'll tell all that you know and something over for good measure. Tie him up, some of you men, and put a guard over him."

His teeth set in a determined way as he walked over to his fire and laid down in the midst of the thick, acrid smoke that enveloped him as if it were a blanket.

With the first gleam of the murky, gray light that crept upon us through the swamp we were astir, and it did not take us long to wash down a few mouthfuls of the tainted *boucain* that we had with some of the muddy water from the swamp, after which we took up our march again.

It was then that trouble began indeed for Pedro. Twice he refused to lead the column, but the men were in no mood to be trifled with, and the man was unmercifully lashed with a great knotted colt—a rope's end—frayed and water-soaked.

I tried to intercede, but it was of no use, and, realizing at last that the man was only crazy where money was concerned, it finally dawned upon me that during his absence from the town it was not unlikely that he had stumbled upon some rich treasure-trove of gold or jewels which he had carried off here and hidden, meaning to return and secure it for himself after our departure.

Each time I tried to intercede for him I was repulsed with curses and revilings, for the men were in a dangerous mood, and I found that by persisting I not only made it more difficult for him but I also drew suspicion to myself.

Finally he would go no farther, but sat down upon a great root and sullenly refused to move. In a trice two of the men had seized him by the elbows and held him as in a vise, while a third man knotted a cord about his temples, and, thrusting a pistol-barrel through the slack of the cord, began to twist.

Sickened, I turned away. I had seen the same sort of thing happen before, and I well knew what the result would be. This time the matter took less time than it generally did, for in a moment I heard a low groan, followed by:

"Slacken it a bit, men! Now, *hombre!* Will you show us now, or do you want another taste?"

There was a muttered assent, and, tied by the arm to a burly buccaneer, the guide, with blood flowing down upon his face and breast, again led off through the forest.

For two hours we plodded along, stumbling over great roots, beset by swarms of venomous flies, sweating, tired, and hungry, until finally we debouched upon a small clearing in the center of which, beneath a giant mango-tree, stood a small shelter of the "lean-to" type—simply a few boughs bent over with their ends thrust into the ground, and upon them the dry grass was piled deep.

Why any person should have chosen this place in which to spend the night was a problem to me, for in that forest the rays of the sun never penetrated save at high noon.

The men hailed the sight with shouts of satisfaction and scrambled forward for a nearer view of it.

Jenkins halted the party and moved forward slowly into the clearing, fearing an ambush. Far over beyond the mango-tree a patch of newly turned earth met my eye, but I said nothing to any one of it.

"Here, you!" shouted Jenkins to the Spaniard, "is this the place where the treasure was buried?"

No answer. The man sulked as he sat. The heavy rope's end curled about his half-naked body, nearly whirling him off his feet, and one of the men came forward, ostentatiously twirling a cord loop on the end of a stick.

"Maybe he'll talk," he said, "if we put this about his head again."

"No, no, no! You promised that there should be no more torture! *Sí*, I will show you what there is. It is yonder—and yonder—and yonder! I took time to bury it, and I had hoped to keep it for my old age—"

The maddened rush of the men interrupted him. The one spade that they had carried with them for nearly forty miles had been thrown away the day before in the depths of the swamp, and they had nothing with which to dig save their sword-blades; but twenty hands made the labor light, and for an hour they panted at the tough turf, tearing away the gnarled roots, chopping them with their cutlases and scraping away the loosened mold with their bare hands.

Once one of the men sprang up with an oath and whirled a piece of bright copper back over his shoulder under the impression that it was gold and that he had found the treasure.

Later four or five pieces of gaily tinted pottery were scratched out of the hole, together with some scraps of bright iron and a little heap of brass tinsel. When they were cast to one side as worthless and the search resumed, the Spaniard sprang upon them and piled them in a little heap.

The tawdry things gleamed brightly in the dying light, and he stooped over them, chattering and jibbering in his madness.

"Where is your wealth?" Jenkins snarled at him when long search had shown that there was absolutely nothing in the place but the few gaudy fragments that had already been unearthed. Pedro paid no attention to him, but sat with his arms about his pile of precious wealth, grimacing into the face of his tormentor.

"It is mine," he shrieked shrilly—"mine! Mine, I tell you! I carried it here by myself and alone I buried it, and I will not give it to—"

Crack!

It was the sharp report of a pistol. The Spaniard plunged forward and lay face down upon the sparkling bits of tinsel and the tawdry-colored glass, the red of his heart's blood dabbling the fallen leaves. His hands and feet beat the earth for a moment and all was still.

Jenkins's hoarse voice broke the silence. "That's what he deserves," he said as he quietly reloaded his long pistol and laid it back in his sash. "That's what he deserves for bringing us forty miles out of our way on purpose to unearth an idiot's treasure. Fall in, men!"

Back we started on our homeward trip.

CHAPTER XI.

CASTLES IN SPAIN.

I WAS ill — mentally and physically ill. The scene in the clearing was enough to upset the nerves of any man not inured to cold, deliberate murder, and my nerves were already stretched to almost breaking tension.

Above all, I could not help entertaining the feeling that Oakes and I were in some degree responsible for the death of the idiot whose love of wealth had led him to bury in this secluded place the bits of tinsel and pottery that he deemed so priceless.

All day long we tramped back through the swamps, following as well as we could the trail that we had made two days before, and all day long the men cursed and raved in their bitter disappointment.

But for that last scene of all, the causeless murder of the inoffensive Spaniard over his pile of fool's gold, I could have sympathized in a way with them, but now I heartily wished the whole lot of them seven fathoms deep in Tophet.

Yet—they had saved our lives, and that thought recurred to me a dozen times. Rough and brutal as they were to others, to Oakes and me they had been uniformly kind.

It took us three days to do that forty miles. There were times when we sank hip-deep in the stinking black mud that clung to us like glue, from which we were only saved from a horrible death by a friendly belt flung to us by a comrade, himself to be rescued later when a slip from a mangrove-root meant certain death.

The great horny-eyelidded alligators, basking on the mud-banks, yawned cavernously at us, and the jungle-crows and mangrove-hens, the evil genii of the place, croaked and jeered at us as they fluttered out of our path.

The whole place seemed to emit a graveyard dampness, and the way was hard and long, so that we were very tired and weary when at last we left the swampland and came out upon the cultivated ground above the city.

The men were about to run forward, when Jenkins threw up a restraining hand.

"We left four ships at anchor off

the town," he said, "and yonder are seven and—see the boats!"

He was right. Our full squadron of seven sail lay in the anchorage, and the decks were alive with men. The four that had come up the bay with us lay with all their canvas furled, but the other three that had been left at Maracaibo had their topsails lying loose in the buntlines, and had all the air of recent, hurried arrival.

That could mean but one thing, and that bad tidings. It was with heavy hearts that we tramped along the shingle to the landing where a line of boats were moored.

It was a stirring scene even to us who had been used to stirring scenes. On the poop of the Black Prince the seven captains were gathered in stormy debate.

Even Hetherington had had himself carried up on deck, and we could see plainly that it could have been no little thing that had caused their excitement. Their talk did not last long, and when the group dispersed the officers came down and called each for his own boat.

By some accident Morgan's boat, instead of dropping alongside to await his orders, had pulled back to his ship, and, seeing that there was no boat to put him aboard his vessel, I spoke up.

"There is the quarter-boat, captain, and if you are in a hurry I will pull you over." His ship lay but a couple of hundred yards from us.

"Very good," was his reply, and down he scuttled into the boat, while I followed him and picked up the oars.

"It is a sweet mess, Upholme," he growled as he settled himself in the yoke-lines. "Have you heard the news?"

I told him that I had not.

"Three Spanish ships-of-war appeared in the offing yesterday—one of them a ship of the line, I think—and ran in to Maracaibo. The fort at the entrance has fallen and Captain Judson has come up here to tell that the straits are closed to us, and that we are caught like rats in a trap."

He pondered deeply for a moment.

"Caracas has ships in plenty of course in her port of La Guayra, and every port along the coast. When they hear of our having been caught in this way they will send ships and men to help to stamp us out, and we cannot force a passage against three ships-of-war and two forts when our heaviest ordnance is that in the batteries of the Black Prince. The straits are too narrow for us to attack in force, and ship by ship they will blow us out of the water at the first broadside."

"Yes, sir," I said, "that is true, but—"

"But what, boy? Speak out and tell me if there is anything in your mind." He looked keenly at me from under his bushy eyebrows.

"I was thinking, sir," I said, "of a book I read once at home. It was a history of the Dutch war with Spain in 1585, and it told how Jenebelli, the Dutch captain, destroyed the bridge at Antwerp and frustrated the plans of the Duke of Parma—"

"How did he do it?" he asked sharply.

"Fire-ships," I answered briefly, and picked up my oars again.

He swore a great oath. "By all the gods, but I believe you have solved the problem for us! Turn back to the Black Prince before the captains leave."

We had been the first to leave the side of the vessel, and we regained her decks before the group of officers had dispersed. Morgan stopped them with a shout as they were about to leave.

"Wait a bit," he said. "Wait a bit!" He sprang to the rail.

I was about to go to my cabin when he stopped me. "Come with me, Upholme." Laying a broad hand upon my shoulder, he fairly pushed me over to the weather side of the deck. "What do you think, sirs? Mr. Upholme here has given me the suggestion that we need."

They looked at him with questions

in their gaze, and he laughed as a man well pleased with himself.

"Oh, yes, I know that it seems unlikely that a lad, and a landsman at that, can help us, but you may remember that the mouse helped the lion in the fable. Have you planned it?" he asked, turning to me. "Tell me what you would do. Speak up, lad."

"Take the Osprey yonder; she is the smallest and can best be spared; shift her guns into the other vessels of the fleet—"

Here a great thought came to me. This was legitimate war, to fight with regular Spanish troops. Moreover, I would now be fighting to save my own neck, and if I could get command of the Osprey and so get to Maracaibo, Dolores was there, and this was the last of my stay upon the Spanish Main.

I made up my mind that if it were possible I would go to her even if it only gave me a chance to see her without having speech with her. It came to me like a flash.

"Well, go on. You would take the Osprey yonder and shift her guns to the other vessels of the fleet, and then—"

"And then, sirs, I would break out her cargo and fill hold and 'tween decks, cabin and forecastle with wood and straw and soak them all with tar and grease and oil. I would fill her magazine with all the barrels of powder that can be spared from the other ships, and I would soak her very timbers with pitch and resin, and when she was so prepared I would run her down upon the Spanish ships—"

"Excellent!" sneered Hetherington; "but when all this was done do you suppose the Spaniards will allow a ship to run so close to them? They will suspect a ruse when they see that there are no guns mounted on the Osprey."

"I would mount a few dummy guns made of painted wood and stand a lot of effigies about her decks."

He looked at me half doubting. "And then—"

"Range my cables, sir, on deck instead of in the tiers. Place an anchor in stern and bow with a length of chain—not rope, they can cut rope—attached to each; and when we run down the Spanish vessels, which will be at anchor, I will grapple them stern and bow, and then set fire to the Osprey."

"Who will do it? I mean, who will you get to set fire to the craft and how will he escape?"

My gorge rose under his taunting tone. "If Captain Morgan will give me leave I will go myself in charge of her," I said. "While it is true I am not a sailor, yet I can take the Osprey down the lake. I know I can get plenty of volunteers. Can I take her, captain?"

"By Heaven, you shall, youngster! And you shall pick your own men; and, if the plan succeeds as it deserves to by reason of its very boldness, you shall have what you wish for your share of the loot. We will begin to change the Osprey at once."

It took much time and a great deal of labor to do it. First of all, we dismounted her guns and transhipped them to the other vessels, mounting them on poop and forecastle, for there were no empty gunports nor platforms on which they could be placed.

Then we got some great logs, and the carpenters were put to work to hew them down to the size and general shape of heavy carronades, which when done we swung inboard and mounted them in the Osprey's empty ports, smearing them with tar to make them look like metal.

Bundles of fagots smeared with tar and oil mixed with packages of gunpowder were cast into the hold, and quantities of resin were strewed over all till the hold was full to the coaming of the main hatch.

Pitch was poured over the sides and the decks, and even the sails were drenched with turpentine.

Last of all we went a begging around the fleet, asking for old

clothes, and it was a choice assortment that we finally got from which to construct our effigies.

We finally got them made, roughly, of course, as was only to be expected; but when I finally ran up the steps to the quarter-deck and scanned the vessel closely for anything that might betray our mission she looked to me like any other small vessel; decks crowded with red-shirted, black-hatted seamen, and showing the muzzles of four black carronades on a side, grinning out through her main deck-ports as well as her full complement of smaller pieces along the poop-rail and on the forecastle.

There was no lack of volunteers. The very danger of the plan attracted them as well as the fact that they knew that an extra share of loot was to be given to the survivors if the plan was successful. I picked twelve men. More would only be in the way, while fewer would not give me enough to handle the vessel. All was ready at last, and I reported to Captain Morgan that I was ready to make sail.

"What are your plans, Upholme?" he asked.

"I will run down to Maracaibo tomorrow, sir, and reach there after dark. Give me two hours' lead of you, sir, and I will go into the town and see what information there is to be had of the Spaniards. If I discover anything I will send a man back in a canoe to tell you. If there is no news I will lay-to and wait for your arrival, and then pick out the biggest of the ships and grapple her and set the Osprey on fire. Don't fire into me if you can help it, sir, during the engagement, because I will not leave the ship till the flames have a good grip of her. Good-by, sir!"

"Good-by, Upholme! Good luck, lad! If you succeed, our escape will be due to you, and I will see to it that it is not forgotten."

He shook hands with me and I pulled back to the Osprey.

By dawn we got up anchor and headed out into the open lake, followed by a storm of cheers from the other vessels of the fleet. The breeze was off the land and held fair behind us, and, taking the precaution of putting a leadsman in the forechains to give timely notice of shallow water, I let the men go to breakfast.

It was a poor enough meal, for, of course, we could light no fires by which to cook. Indeed, the reason I had chosen to sail by day, instead of under the cover of night, was that I did not dare to light even a binnacle lamp, so fearful was I of an untimely fire which would ruin our plans.

We made but slow progress, and it was nearly dusk when we sighted the great headland south of the town of Maracaibo. During that last three hours it is no exaggeration to say that my heart was in my mouth.

If I only had Oakes with me it would have meant much, but too much depended upon him; and it was impossible for him to come, though he had been one of the first to volunteer to accompany me.

Very slowly, under our light canvas, we ran into the cove, the splash of our anchor scaring a thousand water-fowl from the lightly rippling water.

We were three miles from Maracaibo, and away off on the northern horizon I could see an occasional light, showing that the town was again occupied.

I made up my mind that I would go over there and ask for Señor Cabrera, and at least have word of Dolores, if I could not have speech with her, before I left for good and all.

I am older now and more cold-blooded; and if the opportunity offered now in like case, I dare say I would balance against what good could come of it the safety of my crew and the performance of my mission. Then, however, it was different, and I went forward and asked for a man to accompany me.

All of them stepped forward and I selected one, Alston, a little English-

man, a quick and handy seaman; and after giving instructions as to what should be done in my absence, we got the boat, hoisted the little sail, and headed down for the town.

There was not a sign of life in the outskirts, and I motioned to Alston to head for the *muella* that jutted out from the end of the main street; but when we were within a few rods of it I heard distinctly in the stillness the hoarse challenge of a sentry on the pier-head as he halted a party of people on the quay, so I quietly hauled over the sail and set the head of the boat about, making for the beach astern of us.

We made our landing at an isolated spot, and, cautioning Alston to remain with the boat, I picked my way up the beach to the town.

My dress was in no way different from that of the Spanish residents, and I knew that my Spanish was quite good enough to pass me without detection. I knew where Angelo Cabrera lived, for I had seen the house during our occupancy of the place, and I made my way along the deserted street as rapidly as I could with quietness.

The night was pitchy dark, so that several times I had to feel my way along the wall till at last I came to the building which stood upon a corner with two windows, guarded by *portales* of wrought iron, opening upon each of the two streets.

A great door studded with large iron nails opened on the main street, the Calle Real, and in the center of the large door, which was of a size sufficient to admit two horses abreast, was a smaller door, which was used by pedestrians. It was typical of all Spanish houses in warm lands.

I rapped gently upon the door and, getting no answer, knocked again, this time with my sword-hilt. After a few moments I heard some one moving about inside the house, and presently a small grating about a foot square opened in the middle of the door.

"*Que hay?*" a hoarse voice asked. "*Quien es?*" (What do you want? Who is it?)

"I wish to see Señor Angelo Cabrera."

"*Poco á poco.*" (Wait a bit.)

The shutter of the grating slammed into place and I stepped close in the shadow of the doorway. In a few minutes the shutter was again opened, and the voice of Cabrera asked: "Who is it that wishes to speak with me?"

"Is this Señor Angelo Cabrera?" I asked, to make sure.

"Yes, yes. Who but Angelo Cabrera would be fool enough to answer a call after dark?"

"Do you remember a talk that you had with two Englishmen in the roadway away out by the edge of the jungle?"

"Yes, yes," he said quickly. "Is this, then, Señor Upholme?"

"Yes, it is I. I have to come to see you, and I must have a moment of talk."

"Show your face by the grating."

I did so and he flashed a candle in my face. The bolt of the small door withdrew noisily and it opened on its rusty hinges. I stepped inside and it clanged shut.

"What is it, *señor?* Has there been a fight, and have the Brethren of the Coast been defeated?"

"Not that last," I said. I had no mind to trust even Cabrera wholly. "I have come to say farewell to Señora de Montijo. May I see her?"

"Yes. Wait here."

He pushed me into a small room that opened into the *entresol* and placed his candle-lantern upon the table.

"Wait here," he said, "and I will return. You can see her but for a few moments only."

I waited anxiously, and, indeed, once or twice I almost regretted that I had come. Suppose, now that I was in the house with door closed and barred, that Cabreba should have qualms of conscience about what was demanded by his loyalty to his king! In such a

case my mission would be ended before it was well begun.

Before I had time to even formulate my fears I heard steps in the corridor, the door opened slowly, and a heavily cloaked figure entered the room.

The single candle threw but a dim light about the room, but there was no possibility of my mistaking that figure even when it was wrapped in a heavy cloak. It was Dolores. I sprang forward and raised her hand to my lips.

"Oh, *señora*—Dolores!—I could not go away without a farewell word to you. You have been so much to me in this past month. I never knew how brightly the sun shines nor how blue is the sky till I came down here."

She laughed musically—but she let her hand lie lightly in mine as a rose-leaf lies in a muddy road.

"I have thought of you so much, Don Esteban," she said. "And I have wondered what you were about—I have thought of you. And, *señor*"—her voice took on a serious note—"I have prayed for you."

"Then I am safe, at least," I said gently. "Ah, Dolores, a week ago—yes, or even to-night, when I first entered this room—you could have sent me hopeless from you, but now—"

"Yes! Yes! Now" she questioned softly. "What now, Esteban?"

"Why, now neither Spanish king nor priest nor all the crews of the buccaneers shall keep you from me! Will you marry me, Dolores?"

"If you can find a way," she said.

"Do you love me indeed enough to leave this place and come with me to a new land, America, where no man lives in idleness? To live, in short, not the life to which you are accustomed, but—"

"One with you," she said, and I was content.

But to save my soul I could not see any way by which it could be done; for even if everything else was smoothed away, still there remained the fact that the fleet of the buccaneers was no place for my wife.

Then I remembered the money that Oakes and I had at Tortugas, and it came to me that when we returned to the island I could easily get passage on a Spanish trader from San Marco to Caracas, so that at most a year would find me back again at Maracaibo. I told this to Dolores very quickly.

"It seems an eternity," I said, "but will you wait a year for me?"

"A year? Yes, or twenty," she replied. "Here comes Señor Cabrera."

"You must leave, *señor*," he said breathlessly. "At midnight every night the ships of war yonder send a patrol-boat around the harbor, and it is nigh that time. I do not like to hasten you, but you must go. I will light you to your boat."

He picked up the lantern and made as if to accompany me.

"Not for a thousand pesos. A light would mean my destruction. Come if you will, but no light."

I made my adieus to Dolores and stepped outside the door. It clanged into place again, and to my surprise a hand gripped my arm. Cabrera was ahead of me, and my heart stopped beating for a second.

"Did you think," said the sweetest voice in the world, "that I would let you go in this way—when I am not to see you for a year? Not till your boat puts off, indeed, is my farewell said. And, Esteban, you need not be so discreet, for Señor Cabrera knows. Do you not, *señor?*"

I heard the old man chuckle in the darkness. "You two"—he laughed wheezily—"you two! An old man is not always a fool or blind. The starlight told me your tale out there by the edge of the jungle, *señor*—and I have heard a little of the other side in my own house. The saints send you happiness, *señor*. Your betrothed is very dear to me."

He led us down toward the beach by a path different from the one by which I had come. We crossed the plaza and the main street, and were walking slowly down a narrow alley

when I heard the clank of arms and Cabrera stepped quickly back to us.

"Pest!" he said. "It is a patrol. Follow me quickly now, and take care how you step that you make no noise."

But fate, who generally manages to have a hand in human affairs, ordained that the matter should not end so easily or so happily. We ran quickly down the street, keeping to the dark side, and were about to debouch upon the sea beach when, as luck would have it, Señor Cabrera, breathless from his unwonted exertions, stumbled over a sleeping pig and fell headlong on the coarse gravel.

There was a sigh from Cabrera and a series of soul-stirring squeals from that infernal pig as he raced up the street, and close behind us, in the darkness, a voice shouted:

"*Aqui, hombres! Estan aqui! Pronto!*" (Here they are, men! Quick!)

Dolores was sobbing breathlessly as she leaned upon my arm. I quietly threw it around her waist and plunged on up the beach, seeking the boat and a sure means of escaping the patrol, for to be captured as we were meant death for all of us; for me, as one of the Brethren of the Coast; for them, as conspirators against the king.

Twenty yards and Cabrera was down again! We heard the feet of the patrol upon the gravel; lights gleamed in the street above us, and a shot rang out from the *muella*.

"Here!" shouted a voice close to me. "Here, Upholme! Quick, man!"

It was Alston at last, and the boat was there, not fifty yards from us. I did not fear now for myself, because when we should once shove off the darkness would cover us; but I did fear for Dolores.

"Quick, man! Into the boat!" I shouted.

He sprang aboard and shoved her off into deep water. I heard a rush of men's feet above me, and, hampered as I was by Dolores, I flung her behind me as I cleared my sword-arm.

Cabrera sprang in front of me just in time to receive a pike-thrust from a man in the patrol. I saw the point stand a hand's breadth out behind his shoulder-blade.

There was no time now for sword-play, so I cut straight at my man. There needed no second cut. He went down like a pole-axed ox, and I sprang for the boat and seized the gunwale.

"Is she on board, Alston?" I panted.

"Aye, aye," he said carelessly, as he shipped his oars and backed off into the darkness. "A close shave, Upholme. She's in the stern-sheets."

I sprang aft. Dolores was sitting in the stern-sheets, bowed forward, with her face buried in her hands, and she made no resistance as I quietly passed my arm about her.

"Give way for the Osprey, Alston," I said. "We need speed now, if ever! Give me an oar!"

And we pulled noiselessly off into the gray fog that was rolling in from seaward.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BATTLE OF THE SHIPS.

None of us spoke a word during that trip to the Osprey. I could tell by the heaving of her shoulders that Dolores was weeping; but she gave no outward sign beyond a convulsive pressure of my hand.

When we had gone a short distance I took an oar, and we pulled silently but steadily down the coast till we rounded the headland behind which the vessel lay.

We did not see her till we were close aboard, when she loomed suddenly up out of the sea-mist, and, after answering the low hail of the lookout, we clambered on board, and I took Dolores at once to the cabin.

In the darkness the men could not see her and, of course, making a light was out of the question.

"Keep the deck a moment, will you,

Alston?" I said. "And have the men get the anchor. We will get some canvas on her and run back a few miles on our course, so that we will not get into any row with their patrol-boats."

I stood for a moment in the companionway, listening to the patter of the men's feet as they tramped round the capstan and the *clank, clank,* of the pawls; then her head paid off before the breeze and presently I heard the cluck and gurgle of the water past the after run as she began to speak as we headed out into the lake, and I went slowly below to console Dolores.

She was standing in the cabin, and when I entered her two cold little hands grasped mine and I drew them determinedly about my neck. She demurred a little, but let them stay where I put them.

"Oh, what shall I do, Esteban?" she asked. "What shall I do?" And she began to sob. "Where is Señor Cabrera? Was he killed?"

"I fear he was," I answered gravely. "I fear he was killed where he stood, there on the beach. Oh, how I longed for a dark street up which you and he could have fled for safety! You must see, sweetheart, that what I have done was the only thing that was possible. The patrol had seen you, and had you fallen into their hands you could not have explained your presence—"

"How can I explain my presence here?" she asked.

"You must stay here in the cabin, and when daylight comes we will see what can be done. There is one thing certain, and that is that you cannot go ashore. There is another thing! I have not yet told you that I am on a desperate venture and that this ship is a fire-ship."

"A fire-ship?"

"Yes. And we are destined to be the first in action this day, and we fight with halters about our necks, for we cannot expect quarter if we should be taken prisoners. They would hang us as high as Haman."

"But what is a fire-ship?"

I told her and felt her tremble.

"And when you have—have done—what you can — how then shall you escape?"

"We must trust to luck partly for that," I replied. "In the mean time I will get you a man's clothing from one of the effigies on deck. If we have to take to the boat, or, rather, when we have to take to the boat, you will be seriously hampered by your skirts. I will leave you now and get the clothes, and then I will stay on deck. Do you lie down and, if you can, sleep!"

I knew, of course, that she could not sleep. I was all atremble with excitement, for now that we were safe aboard ship I could see the awful chances that had been against us during the night.

I picked up the first effigy that I saw and, stripping it, I carried the clothes to Dolores and returned to the deck, where I sat upon the deck-house chatting to Alston till dawn began to break behind us and the fog began to lift from the water.

The sun came up presently in a blaze of glory, and we set to at our breakfasts. I carried some food and water down to Dolores, and after talking to her for a few moments I was about to return to the deck, when a shout rang out like a trumpet.

"Sail ho!" it said. "Sail ho!" And again: "Sail ho!"

I sprang for the companion-ladder and, gaining the deck, I ran hurriedly forward into the very eyes of the ship.

The men were grouped about the capstan, and it did not need their pointing to show me what the lookout had sighted, for far away down to the southward the level rays of the sun flecked lightly on the canvas of the sails of the ships of our squadron that the man had seen through a rift in the fog wreath as it rolled away along the surface of the bay.

"One, two, three, four, five—yes, and there is the sixth. The whole fleet

is there, men! Now comes our turn in the game. We will lay to till they get close to us, and then we'll lead the fleet down the straits for the passage!"

They gave roaring approval, and we cruised to and fro for an hour, till the ships, with the Flying Stag leading, were close aboard us. The crews were grouped in their fore-riggings and on the forecastle heads, and they scanned us eagerly, and as Morgan came up abreast of us he hailed:

"Osprey ahoy! What news?"

"None, sir," I answered, springing on the rail. "The three ships lie in the fairway and both of the forts are garrisoned." This was true. I had got the news from Cabrera. "They have patrols out along the shore both day and night. If you are ready now, sir, we will give you a lead."

"Aye, aye! Choose your own quarry."

I heard his orders pass rapidly down from the quarterdeck sending the crew to quarters, and we kept away upon our course, heading down the bay for the mouth of the entrance where it opened beyond the headland.

Ship by ship we doubled the cape and opened the straits dead ahead of us, and it is no exaggeration to say that our hearts sank at the sight.

There, anchored squarely in the passage, with their broadsides brought to bear upon the narrow channel, lay three immense Spanish ships of war. The largest of the three loomed big in the early light and seemed to my inexperienced eye to show the scantling of a ship of the line.

When, later, I counted her piercings I found that she had but twenty main-deck ports in her starboard broadside, while the other ships had ten and fifteen, respectively, and that this was bad enough we knew full well, though, to make matters worse, from the fort on the hill, commanding all the shipping, the great golden flag of Spain flung out to the breeze and the gleam of arms from the ramparts and embrasures came to us across the water.

A signal went up on the Flying Stag and, obedient to it, every ship backed her maintopsail and waited. A boat, with a white flag fluttering from its staff, put off from the ship of the Spanish admiral and rowed swiftly down to us.

Running between us and the Flying Stag, she backed water and stopped, and an officer, rising in the stern sheets, hailed.

Morgan himself answered the hail, asking what was wanted, and we could scarcely believe our ears when the offer was made, in all seriousness, from the Spanish admiral to clear the channel and allow us free egress if we would but land our prisoners and restore our loot and treasure.

A roar of laughter went up from the ships when the gist of the message was made known, and the Spanish boat pulled rapidly back to the galleon.

"Go in, Upholme!" shouted Morgan. "We are all with you to-day! Go ahead and lay him aboard!" And down we went for the Spanish galleon.

The three lay as quiet as the grave, their great ports yawning cavernously, with their black, iron mouths grinning menacingly at us.

I expected every moment to be our last, for I well knew that the Osprey had been but a merchant vessel and her timbers were never intended to withstand the shot of a broadside of heavy ordnance when the Spaniard should fire.

There was not a sound aboard him and on the Osprey you could have heard a pin drop. In that last moment I changed all my plans.

"What water have you?" I called to the leadsman.

He gave me eight fathoms.

"Stop your cable at twenty fathoms. Stand by to anchor! I will bring up so that you will board him on his weather quarter."

This was necessary in order that the wind blowing across us to him should give him the full sweep of the flames.

I afterward learned that he thought we were the flag-ship, and that he meant to let us get fairly under the fire of his batteries, when he would literally sink us at a broadside; but we did not wait for that, for when we were within sixty yards of him, running on the wind, I motioned to the helmsman to put his helm down, and, gathering way with every yard, we plunged upon the Spaniard.

There was a crash that threw every man of us prone upon the deck. The men upon our forecastle passed the word, and the two heavy splashes told me that both of our anchors had taken ground, and I immediately snapped my pistol into the train of powder that I had laid through the after bulkhead into the hold.

A spurt of flame shot up forward and a yellow smoke-wreath jumped out of the foretop, where a man had fired the canvas.

The Osprey immediately swung broadside on to the great galleon, and a frenzied shout of terror went up from the Spaniard. We burst into a mass of seething, crackling flame, and the smoke clouds flecked with the fierce glow of burning pitch and resin swirled up in a tornado of destruction.

Years of service in the tropics beneath a brazen sky, in the fierce heat of the southern sun, had dried every drop of moisture from the upper works of the Spaniard, and she burned like tinder.

Not a shot did they fire, but, like frightened sheep, the men huddled aft in the quarter-galleries, and the frequent splashes told us that he was being deserted by his crew.

By this time the other ships of the fleet had closed and bore down in line upon the other two vessels, and very hastily they cut their cables and ran in for the shelter of the land batteries and the heavy guns of the fort.

Before they had got fairly under way I saw my chance, and, springing forward, I seized an ax and cut both cables and then the rope that held us to the flaming ship. There was more for the Osprey to do that day.

"Take to the boat, men!" I shouted. "Quick! For your lives!"

In an instant the boat was drawn up under the counter—we had towed her all day so that she should not be injured by the shot of the Spaniard and so lose to us our only means of escape—and one by one the men dropped from the deck aboard of her.

Then, and not till then, did I go to the cabin and help Dolores to the deck. I cast the bight of a rope about her, beneath her arms, and lowered her to Alston, who passed her aft and made her lie down in the bottom of the boat.

"Now," I said, "shove off for the Flying Stag!" and I, too, sprang down into the little craft.

We shoved off; and even as we cleared her the wind took the Osprey and carried her clear of the Spaniard, and down she went, heading for the second vessel, which was at that moment under the fire of the Black Prince, trying to make for the shore and safety.

Then, indeed, did pandemonium break loose; and crowding on all sail the Spaniard, with the Osprey hooked by her fore-chains to his weather-shrouds, headed off for the entrance.

Suddenly I saw them stop, and his foremast went by the board, and a mass of flame roared, crackling heavenward, from the square of his main-hatch.

The two had taken ground upon a sand-bar, and a fearful sight it was as they roared and crackled away in the sunlight, fast lashed to each other in the glaring light of broad day.

A fire at night, its proper time, is bad enough. By day it is positively indecent. The third and smallest of the Spaniards got away with a few shot between wind and water, and drifted helplessly down-wind and stranded upon the beach.

While all this was taking place, after we left the Osprey, we pulled over to the Flying Stag and boarded her. Morgan was standing by the helmsman, and

he roared approval to me as I came over the side.

"Well done, lad! Well done! Shalt have thy reward this day—"

"I have it now, sir," I answered, "and I have come to ask you to protect it for me. I mean this lady who is to become my wife."

He roared with laughter as I led Dolores forward. "What need for that last, man?" Then he sobered instantly. "I ask your pardon, madam," he said, for the rogue could be courtly enough when it suited him to be so.

"The wife of Mr. Upholme is entitled to the gratitude of every man in the fleet. Take her to my best cabin, Upholme, and tell my steward to get what she desires."

I took her below, and selecting the cabin with the strongest bolts upon the door, I showed her into it.

"You must bolt the door, Dolores," I said, "and open to no man but to me or Captain Morgan. He is as good as his word and will protect you. I will come to you at the earliest possible moment."

I called the steward, a young negro who had come with us from Tortugas, and bidding him get food and wine, I took them to Dolores; and with a lightened heart I heard the bolts click into place as I hurried up to the deck.

It was the beginning of the end, though we did not know it at the time. With the destruction the forts became more accessible and every available man was thrown ashore, and a rush was made for the works upon the headland, but with no success.

We were driven back with a loss in killed and wounded of near eighty men; and, seeing that there was no prospect of taking the place by storming it without sadly depleting our already weakened force, Morgan withdrew to Maracaibo, where he could at any time cut off the supply of water and victual upon which the occupancy of the fort depended.

We lay there for a week, during all of which time Dolores remained upon the Flying Stag. It was, of course, impossible for her to go ashore, and the place was abandoned by the people.

That week was passed by the crews in looting for the second time the unfortunate town. When every peso that could be found had been taken, word was finally sent by a prisoner that unless a ransom of ten thousand pesos was paid every house in the place would be burned to the ground.

Hard as it was, and naked as the people already were in worldly goods, they managed in some manner to procure the funds, and I shall never forget the day that they were brought to the Flying Stag by two Spanish priests —worthy men who had done their best to incite the people to fight as long as there was any chance of success attending their efforts, and subsequently devoted their attention to the palliation of the hardships resulting from our occupancy of the place.

"*Señor,*" said one of them, "we have brought you the money, but there is blood upon it. May it prove to you like the wedge of gold that Achan took. Take it and go, and leave us to the mercy of God, which is all that can now avail us."

For a short minute Morgan was angered; then he laughed grimly. "I can not blame you," he said. "A man does not bless the surgeon for cutting off the leg, however it hampers him. Bethink you, though, father, I have made it possible for every man of you to get to heaven?"

The priest looked his surprise, and Morgan went on:

"Do you not know what the Bible says about the camel and the eye of the needle? You have no rich men now here in Maracaibo, and all will have an equal chance. Wait a bit!" For the priest was about to leave. "Upholme, is there not some little favor that this gentleman can do for you and your betrothed before he leaves us?"

"Indeed there is, sir," I said eagerly. "I was about to ask it as a favor. Sir, I wish to ask you to marry me."

"A Christian ordinance? And in this place?" I did not wonder that the worthy father showed surprise.

"I will tell him all about it, Upholme," said Captain Morgan. "Do you prepare the lady. Sit down, *padre.*"

A tap on the door brought Dolores to the entrance to the state cabin, and in a few words I explained the matter to her. She had been weeping, but a quick flush of color chased away the tears.

"Yes, Esteban," she said slowly, "I will marry you. The Holy Virgin knows my heart, and though my friends may blame me, yet I do not think that their censure—"

She fell to weeping again at the thought of it.

"Come, then," I said; "and as I do with you, so may I also be dealt with."

As we entered the main cabin I saw that it was empty, and that Morgan and the priest had withdrawn to a small room that was quite within earshot.

"*Señor,*" said the priest, "I will not do it! She is a Spaniard, and the man is a heretic and a buccaneer! I will not marry them!"

"Nothing of the kind," rejoined Morgan lightly. And in a few words he told him my story. Where he had heard it I do not know, but he had it pat enough. "And for further argument," he said, "if argument be needed, when I have you in my power I will say that it is better for the lady to have you marry her than to leave without the ceremony. If she should have to wait till her arrival at Jamaica her good name would suffer, and that is your business."

They reentered the main cabin and saw us standing by the open port.

"Is it your wish, *señora,* that you be married thus?" asked the priest.

Dolores flushed and half smiled as she answered: "The surroundings could be better chosen, but it is perhaps better thus. Yes, I am content."

"Then God guard you, *señora.* I will marry you. And you, *señor,*" he said, turning to me, "may the saints turn you to a better life and give you knowledge of your prize."

It took but a few minutes. What it must have cost Dolores in pride I will never know, for men do not measure those things; but I do know that it was with tear-wet eyes and smiling lips that she turned to me—my wife.

There remained a problem for us to solve. We must get to sea, and that right speedily, lest a greater force should shut us in the bay.

The fort at the entrance still held out, and under its heavy guns it would be madness for us to attempt to run the gantlet of the straits.

For an hour after the priests had left the ship Morgan sat alone in his cabin. At the end of that time he called for a boat and went from ship to ship among the fleet, and I noticed that each vessel, as soon as he left it, shifted her anchorage a little so that she came in plain view of the fort and promptly lowered all of her boats. I could not guess what was afoot, so I sat in wonderment.

The fort, as has been said, stood on the end of a high promontory that was connected with the mainland by a low and narrow neck, easily defensible, but on which no batteries had been erected.

Ship after ship, the vessels of our squadron manned their boats and sent them ashore on the low ground, perhaps half-way between Maracaibo and the fort.

The boats held perhaps twelve men each; and on their return, though I saw no men in them, yet the boats were not an inch lighter in the water than when they left the ships full of men.

I marveled at this till they came close enough for me to see what had caused it. The men had sat on the seats during the trip to the shore, and on the return passage they had lain prone in the bottom of the craft, thus making the watchers on shore believe that the entire personnel of the fleet had been landed.

In an hour the effect was very apparent.

We distinctly saw groups of the Spanish soldiery gathered on the walls intently watching what they thought was the disembarking of the crews for an attack by land upon the fort.

Then parties of workmen were set to work with picks and shovels to throw up defenses on the landward side; and, gun by gun, the heavy pieces of ordnance were withdrawn from the sea-face of the fort and were placed to rake the road.

When the last piece had been placed, and you can well believe that we kept careful count, Morgan gave the signal, and as if by magic the canvas was spread on every ship, anchors were hastily called, and ship by ship we headed for the open sea through the straits, on either side of which the Spanish soldiery could be seen and heard as they strove to bring a gun to bear, swearing, in their impotent wrath, at the trick that had saved us.

It was a glorious land wind that took us out, and we ripped through the water till the spindrift flung aft in spumy masses and the wake tailed away astern in a mile of snowy water, while the scuppers were awash with green water that broke as far aft as the foot of the mainmast.

"Your luck holds good, Upholme," laughed Morgan. "We will head for Jamaica, where the division will be made of all the loot that we have taken."

It was many days till we made the land—days that were golden through all their many hours, in which I sat with Dolores beneath the gaudy poop awnings or lounged about the quarter-deck in the brilliant light of the gorgeous tropic moon.

"To-morrow we raise the land," I said, "and we will make Kingston. We shall have no trouble there in getting a vessel to take us northward. Indeed, with the notes that Captain Morgan has given me for my effects on Tortugas, we can buy a vessel of our own if it is necessary. Are you not even yet afraid, Dolores, when you realize that you are facing an unknown future?"

She will always be to me as she was that last evening in the dusk of the quarter-gallery, with the glimmer of the phosphorescent wake lighting her face as she leaned against me.

"After trusting in the dark," she observed, "it is easy to trust in the light."

THE END.

NEVER AGAIN.

I WILL sing with you, I will jest with you,
I will dance with you down the year;
But trudge a day on a weary way?
Never again, my dear.

I will feast with you when the lights flare high
And the hall is warm with cheer;
But share a crust in a garret's dust?
Never again, my dear.

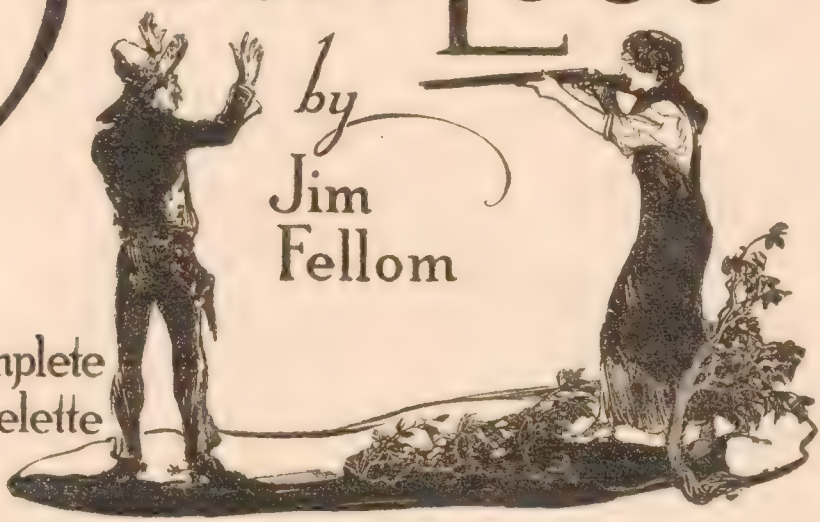
For the gold of the heart is given once—
Yes, once, and but once, I fear;
And a true love slain comes back to reign
Never again, my dear!

Theodosia Garrison.

Desert Loot

by Jim Fellom

A Complete Novelette



I.

A FROLICSOME wind was stirring up spirals of white dust out of Grapevine Flat and sweeping them toward the far-off eastern barricade of blue hills. Low on the northern horizon a cloud snuggled against a peak. It was a tiny smudge, seemingly no larger than a biscuit and innocent of mien. From time to time it shifted, swinging like a pendulum, the sport of counter currents of air.

Peggy Gilbert had watched that black speck for an hour. Wise in the lore of the desert, its presence at that particular point of the sky-line caused her no end of uneasiness.

For the twentieth time she pulled up the team of mules and studied the omen closely. Then she popped the blacksnake savagely into the animals' flanks, swung them sharply out of their course, and steered straight for the broken range three miles to the west.

Across the roadless region the high spring-wagon jolted and swayed, plunging into hollows and out again.

It was desperate driving, and the man stretched upon the bedding groaned often and protested in vain. Again and again he tried bracing against the sideboards as a means of sparing himself the merciless hustling.

But his strength was unequal to the task. He was slung about violently, tossing and bumping in his narrow quarters with every list and lunge of the speeding wagon.

"No, no! Peggy, I can't stand it! Please, Peggy, Peggy!" He chattered the appeal many times before she heard.

"You shut up, will yer?" she flared over her shoulder. "Yer lucky you're alive, Pete Gilbert. I oughter dump you out, that's what I oughter do. You're no good. A boozer and a coward, that's what y'are! Lettin' a little shrimp like Jim Miles beat yer up, and me, yer wife, knocks the stuffin's outer him after. You big calf! If yer wasn't sick I'd— Anyway, you cooked yer goose with me, I can tell yer!"

To emphasize her words she swung the whip with renewed vigor, and the lagging brutes galloped on again.

For a while nothing was said. The man gave up. He drooped visibly, his

drawn face turned to the afternoon sun, his eyes listless with suffering and that dumb toleration that shows in the overweak.

Womanlike, Peggy pressed her advantage. It took the form of cutting remarks and sneering criticisms delivered to the lonely landscape, settling finally to a personal diatribe.

"Drat such a man as you be!" she snarled, holding to the seat and leering upon him. "And to think I'm tied to you for the rest of my days! Me, Peggy Trent, to have to keep on as one of the Gilberts! To be pesticated with your grouches and your swillin' of booze!

"Me, a young woman, to be nailed to a livin' cross—yes, nailed to a livin' cross! Takin' all your sass when yer up and around, and yer slobbers when yer down sick. Sister Lizzie said I'd curse the day.

"You, with your airs and your pretty ways before strangers, and a kick for yer wife! For fourteen years I've taken all your Cain, Pete Gilbert. I've wore my fingers off for you and gone hungry, and followed yer from one end of Christendom to the other.

"And what do I get? A cuss word when I ain't lookin' for it, that's what! You're flat on yer back now, and yer sweet as honey 'cos yer scared yer'll die. But yer settled yer hash yesterday. Couldn't square a store-bill and had to have it taken outer yer hide—yes, and run outer town to boot.

"Gawd, what a disgrace! If it wasn't for that smash on yer head, off yer'd go this minute. I'd give yer a taste of my medicine for once, yer big false alarm!"

With the last word she looked at the distant cloud. It had grown alarmingly active. It hung clear of the peak, floundering like an anchored balloon in a stiff wind.

The nearest highland was a squatty ridge half a mile away; the approach to it a maze of washouts. Frantically Peggy belabored the mules, hopeful of reaching the spur and security.

But her efforts were wasted. True to her understanding of things desert, the cloud broke from its fastenings in the northern sky, described a small arc to the east, straightened, and swept toward her with the speed of an arrow.

Sobbing with anger and disappointment, she jerked the team around and headed it with the storm. Then she sprang to the ground, dragged a tarpaulin over the lathered backs of the animals, and raised a teepee-tent on a near-by hillock with the despatch of an old camper.

"Come on and get outer that!" she commanded roughly. "D'yer hear me? Gimme yer hand."

She was standing at the tail-end of the wagon, an arm extended toward the recumbent figure, hatred in her eyes.

"Gimme yer hand, I said. There's a cloudburst comin', and I ain't reckonin' to have any more trouble with yer. What with a wettin' and yer dear, booze-fightin' friend, Dr. Lencia, not here to give yer a pill, yer'd die, yer good-for-nuthin' lummicks! It'd be the best thing that could happen yer. Gimme yer hand, I tell yer!"

With this she jerked the one blanket clear of the man. His head sagged, then rolled into a space between the water-cans. The cans popped musically. Simultaneously one hand, animated by the action, struck knuckles first against the grub-box. Limply he settled flat upon his face.

The first heavy drops were pelting the dry earth and the din of the approaching storm had swelled to a weird screech, but Peggy exhibited no concern. Clutching the blanket, she stood staring in horror at her husband's shaggy head while the rain soaked it and the rivulets started into his collar.

Long after a voice came out of the distance.

"He's dead. Queek, get in the tent! I see to you outfit. Go on! He's dead, I tell you!"

She looked around in bewilderment.

The speaker was at her elbow, a big, greasy Mexican with bold, sharp eyes and a middle that overlapped his belt. When she made no movement to obey he caught her by the arm, led her into the teepee, and spread out his canvas coat.

"Sit on it," he said curtly. "Maybe keep you dry. I watch yo'r traps. An' don' forget, you stay here." A warning finger accompanied this last.

But to all appearances his intentions were of a lawless nature. Once outside, he fastened the tent-flaps securely, tied his waiting horse to the end gate of the wagon, and climbed into the seat. The next minute he was galloping the mules into the teeth of the storm.

Then the sky deluge broke, swamping the region. It flattened out the tent and turned a flood into it. Lightning flew thick as the sparks from the welding-hammer of a smith and thunder jarred the earth. The day faded into early light, intensifying the horrors of pandemonium.

Out of the cañons rode destructive tides one upon the other. They raced across the plain like monstrous, writhing serpents, ripping chasms in the sandy floor and piling the refuse in the next township.

And, as suddenly as it came, so did the cataclysm go. Three minutes later it was shrieking a mile away, seemingly a heaven-strung curtain dragging on the ground.

When Peggy found her way out of her dismantled shelter the region was steaming under the hot rays of the sun. She glanced about dully, her mind reflective of no ideas save the impelling one that Pete was dead. She had neither fear nor interest — no hopes, no motives, no methods, not even regret.

Pete was dead. He was gone, that was all. His head had thumped against the water-cans and he had slued over on his face. After fourteen years he had quit. She had never believed he would quit that way — she had never stopped to think that he would quit at all.

As it was he would never drink himself blind again, there would be no fumes of stale liquor to sicken her next morning, no broken promises, no quarrels, tears, patching up, poverty, or discontent.

Pete would leave her alone now. He was through, and she was free to live her life in her own way.

She could get no further in her reflections. It was as if her faculties were warped around these particular facts, as if her abhorrence of them in the past had made them growths of her inner conscience.

In truth, they had been the gall of her married state, and she knew them for the horrid distaste they had carried. Now that she was rid of them she would—what would she do?

She put away the thought—not so much because it beggared an answer, but rather because she did not care. In any event, she would be Peggy Trent in nature if not in name.

From habit she adjusted her hair and smoothed out her dress. She was partly conscious of being wet through and that her clinging raiment bothered her. Also, there was a faint recollection of a strange man speaking to her.

She tried to remember something about him, and her eyes fell upon the tent. Mechanically she proceeded to gather it up, and while doing so exposed the canvas coat.

For a short time she studied the garment vaguely. Then she picked it up, subjected it to a closer inspection, and recognized it. It was Pete's discarded coat — her Christmas present to him two years ago!

There was that odd bone button with the black streaks through it that she had sewed on to replace the broken metal catch. And matches had burned that very same hole in the left pocket.

Pete had given that coat to some one last spring, and it struck her now that he had mentioned the man as his

partner. She tried to recall who this partner had been. But the familiar memories awakened within her at sight of this homely token of her devotion engrossed her to the exclusion of all else.

Pete had worn that coat, and it had been the last thing she had given him. He had cursed her extravagance at the time, it is true; but then that was Pete's way, and more generally he was tenderest when in his roughest moods.

And because she was the woman Peggy wept over that dirty rag. She wept, mindful of a great loneliness, until there suddenly flashed across her understanding the remembrance of where she had last seen Pete. She started around, swept by a keen revulsion of feelings that she had neglected him.

Then followed a wild search — a search that took in the horizon in every direction. The outfit had disappeared.

White of face, her whole being alive to the terrors of this new calamity that set her afoot without food or water in that vast, barren, untenanted land, her fearful gaze wandered back to the spot where she had abandoned the wagon.

Instantly she saw what seemed a horrible truth. A torrent springing out of a neighboring cañon had plowed a yawning way for itself across the open space of sand that had held her belongings. From the far depths came the trickle of water—the last drops of a mighty flood that the thirsty earth had taken into its bowels.

Screaming frantically, she pitched headlong to the ground.

II.

When Peggy regained her senses she was lying in bed well blanketed. She opened her eyes to the light of a candle and recognized the roof and walls of a tent-house.

A camp-stove hummed merrily in one corner. The air, though pregnant with the balmy smell of vegetation, was strong with the stench of drugs and victuals. From without a sound like the sighing of the wind through the pine woods reached her ears.

Against the opposite wall a man sat at a table. He was a tall fellow, heavy-boned, and habited in the garb of the Nevada gold-hunter. Peggy contemplated him stupidly.

He was poring over a map, occasionally stopping to guide a fast pencil in what appeared to be diagram work. She noticed also that he made many notes upon a writing-pad, and that he smoked cigarette after cigarette, kindling the last from the coal of the one consumed.

For many minutes she studied him. No doubt, she told herself, he was some surveyor. But she cast aside this conclusion with the discovery that she knew every surveyor in the district.

And directly upon the heels of this reflection sprang the realization of her presence in that tent. What did it mean? Perhaps she had been sick. Her hand stole to her head and encountered a bandage. Thereupon she sought to unravel the mystery, but in her confused state of mind not the faintest inkling of explanation presented itself. She gave up the attempt and continued her scrutiny of the stranger.

His eyes attracted her now. They were large, luminous eyes, eloquent of a kindly nature, sharp withal. By the uncertain light she believed she marked a haggard expression of the lids, and that they were underlined with heavy circles, indicative of little sleep.

His face, too, bore out the testimony of the eyes. It was a good, strong face, clean-shaven, and prominent of forehead.

Waking, though she had, in an atmosphere of foreign surroundings, and experiencing the want of decision so characteristic in the human strange to a situation, Peggy, however, felt that this man was likable.

In an indistinct way she knew that

he was performing a duty other than what occupied him at the moment, and that the duty had to do with her illness. But where was Pete?

After this she glanced aimlessly over her quarters. But, owing to the position of the candle, which threw a shadow over the greater part of the interior, she could form little idea of the place. Two things alone impressed her—a collection of firearms on a rack and a square, hand-made willow cage, hanging from the tent-ridge.

This last held her attention. It contained a small, black object, which she finally made out to be a magpie. He huddled on his perch with every semblance of sleep. Further observation disclosed the fact that his head was cocked at a doubtful angle and that one beady eye covered her with gross distrust.

It was an evil stare. She met it curiously at first, then its dogged intensity filled her with a strange disquiet. While she knew magpies to be shrewd, radiant birds notorious for mischief, in her weak, nervous condition she became obsessed with the idea that this piebald pet was the embodiment of ill-omen.

The conviction grew apace. It assumed in time a definite, if not a more personal, form. His machinations were directed at her. She did not seek to reason the cause—her mind was too prone to vagaries—but rather did she allow herself to be carried away by a host of wild fears, which increased with the delusion that the implied threat, so apparent in the bearing of that ignoble bird, would be momentarily visited upon her. At last, in a frenzy of terror, she shrieked and shrieked.

Whereupon the man at the table looked up. Simply did he look up, without altering his posture by so much as a frown. He looked under his heavy brows at her narrowly. Then, as if there was revealed to him something he had not known, he arose and crossed to the bed.

And, as he came within reach of her hand, Peggy clutched him madly, dragged him down beside her, and buried her head upon his breast. There she remained, moaning dismally, panting, and exhausted.

"Don't be frightened," he repeated over and over in a deep, gentle voice. "See, I'm here, and there's not a bit of danger."

When she had grown calmer he disengaged her hands and helped her back upon the pillow. He took to watching her now, stroking her head the while. In the end he took down the cage, set it on a box in a dark corner, and flung a towel over it.

"That's Feathers," he smiled as he resumed his position on the edge of the cot. "A most amusing fellow. He's as good as a watch-dog and really brilliant."

His hand rested a moment upon her wrist as he spoke: "I'll give you your medicine now, and then we'll see about a little nourishment. That'll be worth while, don't you think?"

Spent with her exertions, Peggy did not answer. Her eyes clung to his in an undetermined stare, and she became oddly sensible of a soothing influence that steadily restored her confidence. Straightway she forgot Feathers and his evil eye, to listen again to what his master was saying. He had paused in the middle of the floor.

"I don't want you to misinterpret my actions when you screamed a while ago," he reminded her. "You've been delirious so often that I wasn't really certain. However, the fever is broken, and while we were afraid we would lose you a few days back, you're as good as on your feet this minute. Now, I'll fix you up that little bite, and then you'll be ready for a good, old-fashioned sleep."

An hour later, following a meal of poached eggs, toast, and tea, he arranged her comfortably for the night and stirred up the fire.

During all this little was said. There was that about her benefactor which

told Peggy she was to be spared conversational burden. It was welcoming news to her fretfulness. Whoever he was, or whatever he represented, his treatment of her was all that could be desired.

It occurred to her, as she lay watching him, that his forethought showed his earnest interest and his eager disposition to please, added to which was his gentility of bearing that proclaimed him a man worthy of every trust.

But, even as this conviction took root in her mind, she discovered an indefinable trait in his manner. It mystified her. Some time after she was not so certain of him.

There was business in his eye, she thought, flashes of it that she caught now and then, and a tightening of the lips—the calculating expression of a hard bargain-driver.

She found herself awaiting these singular warnings, and the fact that they were absent when he felt her gaze upon him caused her no little speculation. And yet, in contrast to this phase in his demeanor, was his ready sympathy, his cheery, welcoming smile, and his painstaking attentions. What must she believe?

Afterward he went back to his map and his cigarettes and apparently forgot about her.

The day was hours old when Peggy awoke. She was alone. Save for a dull pain in her head and her brain a turmoil of disconnected thoughts and ideas, she was conscious of a partial return of her old vigor.

The sunlit tent-top was etched with the filigree of waving pine-boughs. Through the parted canvas-flap she could see the forest-clad slope of a hill, and at its feet in the middle distance a thick grove of willows.

She looked curiously over her quarters, noting at a glance that they were typical of the desert rover's home. Odds and ends of adventure life held souvenir prominence upon the walls. They ranged from the corkscrew headgear of a buck big-horn and sundry well-cured hides to obsidian arrowheads and strange specimens of "water-lime" formation.

Later, when she had made a more comprehensive examination, she was impressed by an odd fastidiousness for detail that prevailed throughout the place.

She admitted to herself that the atmosphere of neatness and system would have done credit to the most exacting housewife. She doubted her own ability to duplicate it.

Particularly was this true of the burnished pots and pans hung in regular order behind the well-kept stove, and the glistening array of china in the cupboard.

In one corner a fresh bouquet of wild flowers stood upon a stand artistically draped in Turkey red; in another unusual growths of cacti trailed or clambered from tomato-cans. Magazine half-tones in rustic frames occupied every available space, and gilded pine-cones were strung in one continuous line along the intersection of roof and walls. The bedclothes, even, were invitingly clean and comfortable, lacking those signs so characteristic of long service.

So it was that, from observing these things, Peggy reached the conclusion that here was a man with the refined propensities of a higher-up civilization. She knew the denizens of those parts, and they were of a species.

For the reason that the desert develops shiftlessness, blunting men by checking off their wants to the stern basis of what they can get, the life was programmed, robbed of the frills of luxury, the unit of roughness.

Who, then, was this exceptional fellow—this man who still clung to the worth-while bits of home comforts? And, since he was a stranger, what meant her presence under his roof and Pete's continued absence?

She dwelt upon this at length, but, try as she would, she could find no solution to the problem. Something had happened, but where, or when, or

whether or not the consequences were of any great moment, she could not even surmise.

Came the thought that her host would tell her. Unquestionably he would give her the details of an accident, how she had been removed to the cooler heights of the Crater Beach Range, also that Pete was even then making one of his daily drives for the doctor.

The hint conveyed by this last probability sent her hot with resentment. Would Pete be so despicable as to relinquish her to the care of that drunken practitioner, his crony, Dr. Lencia, of Sand Dyke Bar?

The thought was like a slap in the face. This same Dr. Lencia had been the cause of much of her misery. He had lent his conviviality to the extent of helping make Pete a drunkard.

Her mind harked back to Pete's occasional absences from Dugout, terminating in the wildest debauches of his career. In reality they had been nothing less than friendly calls upon the notorious medico of the neighboring camp.

Pete had told her as much. She remembered that he was proud of his boon companion, recounted his methods with much boasting, and bragged of their friendship. At any rate, the carousals went on.

In true wifelike fashion she hated this perverted trafficker of her husband's weakness. Would that she might face him to squelch him with the fires of her indignation. Upon the first occasion she would—

Here a light broke upon her understanding and her eyes reflected it wickedly. She looked toward the table. A collection of bottles caught her attention and she drew herself far over the edge of the bed in an endeavor to read the labels. She tried without success. However, they were proofs of a doctor's visit, and who than Dr. Lencia would find greater favor with Pete?

She smiled grimly. At last she was to face this tempter. For every heartache she would avenge herself tenfold—she would break up this cursed friendship, this spell that was bringing about Pete's undoing. Over and over she rehearsed a torrent of abuse calculated to humble him to her wishes.

And, so wrapped up in her scheming was she, that she failed to notice the swarthy face of a man peering in at the tent opening. He came unannounced and for a moment stood silently watching her with a look at once shrewd and compassionate.

Then, as if obeying a sudden impulse, he strode in with a bluster of boots.

It was the big, greasy Mexican with the glittering eyes and overplump paunch. He advanced within a pace of the bed and stopped. At the same time his contemplation of her, as half-fainting with dread of him she shrank against the wall, changed visibly to a crafty, expectant stare.

Had Peggy been in full possession of her faculties she would have noted the singularity of this. She would have marveled also at the striking contrast between it and his accompanying words, clothed in the guise of friendship, musically low and engaging.

"You bin sick, no, *señora?* I see you, *requerda,* when he rains? I tak' you in the tent? You know that time—no? You' hosband die in the wagon?"

She studied him fearfully, noting the flourishes of his hands and his subsequent shrug of shoulders before giving heed to his overtures.

Then, as little by little the significance of their meaning filtered into her brain, she remembered the tragedy in the flat. Pete was dead! The knowledge struck her like a blow.

Thereafter she forgot the intruder. She fell back upon the pillow and thought over the startling news, and pieced together the details that had robbed her of her man. Slowly, apathetically, she pieced them, tracing the tragedy to its cause, while something in the dark face of her visitor showed that he had expected just such a procedure.

There had been trouble between Pete and Jim Miles of the Dugout Merchandise Company over an unpaid grocery bill. Miles, a soft-muscled fop with gone wind, had thrashed her stalwart husband unmercifully and laid open his head with a pinch-bar.

True, she had vindicated Pete's honor by publicly trouncing the braggart merchant, but as a result Barr, the constable, had tendered them the alternatives of leave town or go to jail.

Since Pete's standing in the community was without value or influence, they had come away with their shame and their belongings, bound for the far settlement of Calaverite, which place Pete had named as the portals to an honorable life.

Then had come the cloud-burst. She remembered how Pete's bushy head had looked and how the rain had streamed into his collar.

She had been too hard on Pete. The incident at Dugout, while it was a humiliation of the meanest sort, had not entirely warranted the severity of her reproaches. Moreover, she had not believed him so seriously hurt. The worst that could have been said of the wound in his head was that it would be more painful than dangerous.

Besides, fussiness had been one of Pete's foremost characteristics. She recalled his way of shamming, how he could screw up his face in seeming distress, and moan and tremble and shed tears on occasions to win her sympathy.

Pete had been a shammer, and, like the fabled boy who cried "Wolf!" had lost her confidence in the hour of his real need. But, then, Pete was dead, and for all his weaknesses and shortcomings he had been her husband. Poor Pete!

Overwhelmed by her emotion, she wept, while her mysterious brown-skinned companion eyed her in glum indecision.

He waited impatiently, though with the determined air of one who will see a situation to its end; and when at last Peggy dried her tears he dragged a camp-stool near and occupied it. That minute he turned strangely confidential.

"Señora Gilbert, I frien' to you. Feliciano Machado my name. I know Pete well. Heem an' me *companieros*, pardners, lak brothers, shuah—fife years. Heem tole you, maybe—no?"

As he spoke his expression changed to one of designing intent, though veiled in a great measure by a rare eagerness of manner, so obvious as to rouse Peggy from her abstraction. She regarded him suspiciously, and he fawned.

"I sor-ry fo' you, *señora*. *Dios mio!* You ha'f moch tr-rouble, I know. I bury Pete—an' you' wagon an' *mulas*, I got'm. I tak' 'im that day. It is better fo' you stay in the leetle tent an' no get wet. But you go. I come back an' no fine you. *Mil demonios!* How I look fo' you! I look all day. I know thees camp. In the nigh' I come, an' you are here, sick. Now, Pete, my ver' good frien'—no? So I wan' to be frien' to you. I lak help my frien's!"

If he had hoped to create an impression by these assurances of good will, his failure must have been plain to him. In Peggy's estimation he fitted the part of an extraordinary rascal so thoroughly as to fill her with no little apprehension.

She knew as well as if he had told her that he had secured his visit against interruption; that her benefactor was even then miles away, or given over to some employment that precluded the possibility of his unexpected return.

All of which went to convince her of the evil underlying this man's purposes, and that, whatever its nature, it was to find egress through her.

Yet, in the face of her increased alarm over this presentiment, two things stood out boldly in her mind—the likelihood of his statements and the fact that they were clearly given to prepare her for further information.

In the short silence that followed his narrative she decided to meet his advances with a show of friendship, if for no other reason than to gain time—an important factor in her present straits.

She steadied herself to say:

"That's mighty nice of you, Mr. Machado, and I ain't never goin' to forget what yer've done. And—and, of course, you buried Pete?"

"I wait the Dogout stage," he informed her, after muttering his regrets over the smallness of the services. "I take Pete to Tin-Can Spring, where is the road. One man, Dr. Lencia, feex it, pack 'im to Dogout."

"Dr. Lencia!"

Machado smiled encouragingly.

"Shuah. Heem say, too, 'Poor Pete, I tole 'im so, an' now he dead.' Heem ver' sor-ry, I know. It is better yo' hosband go the *campo-santo*—how you say?—cemetery, *señora.*"

He appeared to be searching her face after this, as if he expected some sign to follow the double meaning of his remark. But its significance had slipped her notice.

She was gazing at the patch of green hillside that presented itself through the tent entrance, her brows knit, her mouth pursed in perplexed thought.

"Thees nice place," tendered the man, in an effort to break her silence, passing a cursory glance over the interior. "It is clean an'—"

Peggy interrupted him.

"What did he mean by, 'Poor Pete, I told him so,' and all that?" She was looking at him now, almost severely.

"I dunno," he admitted. "He say it, an' he give the driver ten dollar. Dr. Lencia, lak' me—he lak' help hees frien's."

"Oh, yer know him, then?"

"Shuah. But not ver' well. Heem, sometime—"

"Well, is he the good fellow they say, that wears fine duds, and talks to yer in book lingo? One of them tin-horn sports, so to speak?"

Her tones were pronouncedly bitter and the glitter in her eye gave indication of a brewing storm. The Mexican straightened slowly in his seat. He looked away with an enigmatical smile, crooking his long arms above his head in a prodigious stretch.

"Dr. Lencia, I t'ink, all r-right," he evaded, a convincing ring in his voice. "See, he good to Pete, now—he good to Pete many times. Maybe—"

"Good and rotten!" snapped Peggy, her unconquerable hatred of the physician wiping away the last vestige of fear she had entertained for her visitor.

"I know how he poured whisky into Pete. Yes, he did, fed it to him for the fun of gettin' him drunk. Every blessed trip that Pete took to Sand Dyke Bar it was treatin' from the minute he got there till the minute he left.

"Who put up the money, d'ye suppose? Did yer ever know Pete Gilbert—and you're a friend of his, yer say—to have money to treat? Yer can't tell me! Didn't I used to talk and talk to him, and beg him not to go to the Bar, and to not hang 'round this Dr. Lencia?

"And what would he do? He'd come back full to the eyes. Then, it was Dr. Lencia here, and Dr. Lencia there, and him apeing a lot of stuck-up ways, and tryin' out a rigamarole of didoes an' sassiety stunts from morning till night until I was crazy.

"If you want to know so bad, this shyster jest about broke up my home, and was the death of Pete! D'ye mean to sit there and tell me that Jim Miles would 'a' had a look-in if Pete hadn't been satcherated that day?

"And, he had jest come from bein' with Dr. Lencia two nights before! That's how I feel about your pill-pedler, and yer kin tell him so. Yes, and yer kin say for me that I ain't makin' no secret of huntin' him up one of these fine days—him and Jim Miles. They'll think they've been shot with pack-saddles time I get through with them!"

In her excitement she had risen to a sitting posture; now, having delivered herself of so much, she settled back, glaring her defiance.

But the Mexican made no response. As a peace offering he smirked indo-

lently, rolling a cigarette as if he used the action for purposes of delay. In this respect he was singularly sly. Having dissipated the feather-edge of her wrath, and encountering no opposition to her opinions, Peggy took another tack.

"Whose camp is this, and where are we, anyway?"

"One fellow, heem here ev'ry year—to hunt. I see heem way off thees morning. I watch heem two miles, then I come back queek. I know you here. Thees is Tecolote Cañon."

He said the last meaningly, and shot her a shrewd glance, as if he counted upon some change of countenance to attend the information.

When this did not happen, his air of lassitude vanished suddenly. He hitched the stool closer and assumed a determined pose.

"Señora Gilbert, I wan' tell you something," he asserted in a brisk voice. "You know that day it rains? Well, I follow you that day. I follow you from Dogout. I tole you jus' now, Pete an' me *companieros,* pardners, fife years. You know this coat? Look, is it not from heem?"

He swung in his seat that she might inspect the garment. "Then, you know I spik tr-ruth. But, I follow you that day. Ver' well. You, his wife, *señora,* an' you know that bisness—how we get silk, cigaros, di'monds from Mexico, no? He tell you, *señora,* no? About the contrabando—smoggling, you call heem? It is so, no?"

He paused, his dark face aglow with rapt expectancy, his eyes holding hers by the very power of their questioning.

"Smugglers!" exclaimed Peggy hoarsely, starting from her blankets. He nodded.

For the fraction of a minute complex emotions played over the woman's face, as, struggling between incredulity and dread, she strove for utterance. Her first impulse was to give this gloating scoundrel the lie. But the humor passed before a morbid hankering after particulars, that was, in part, accentuated by her fixed purpose to demand proofs of the accusation.

"Oh, Pete tell you orright," continued Machado, with a knowing wink. "You say Dr. Lencia is blame that Pete is kill'? *Mira!* Pete lie to you! Dr. Lencia no drink! He tell yo' hosband all time, 'Br-race up. You marrie' man an' you do not do righ'. Some day you be sor-rl.' Pete tole me thees, an' he laugh. If you wan' know, Jeem Miles an' Pete figh' because of the *contrabando.* For fife years Miles he take it from us. All the time we br-ing it thees place, Tecolote Cañon.

"Las' time we haf' $17,000 di'monds, silk, an' cigaros, no? Pete steal 'im—he steal all, no? Jeem Miles say, 'Where you put 'im?' Pete, he say, 'Gover'men' man fine 'im an' take 'im. I no can help it.' They figh', no? Pete is kill', an' ev'rybody tink Pete no can pay a store bill, that is why. *Madre de Dios!* It is the $17,000 of *contrabando* he steal! Oh, Pete he tell you, orright. Come, *señora,* what heem say?"

The earnestness in his tones and his evident desire for a mutual understanding, convinced Peggy of the truth of his allegations. Her husband, a smuggler!

In the great Southwest, one of that wretched tribe of men who transgress the laws of nations, skulk in the desert places, shun their fellows, and travel in the dark of the moon. Such a man was an out and out thief!

But the Mexican was speaking, and now, there was a trace of bitterness in his tones.

"That is why I follow you. It is my bisness. *Chinforras!* Pete rob me too, lak' he do Jeem Miles, don' he? We t'ree pardners, no? I no get not'ing. I follow you, find out where he hide the *contrabando.* Now, he dead, I come see you." Mumbling in an aggrieved way, he lit another cigarette.

Just here Peggy reached a logical

conclusion. It was enough to suffer for Pete's indignities after his death without having to fraternize with his greaser confederate.

The thought turned what mite of forbearance she had for Machado into wrathful indignation. Her eyes filled with a cold light so eloquent of her change of temper that the man rose to his feet.

"Too bad you sick, Señora Gilbert," he palliated lamely. "I hope you batter soon. I mos' go now. Maybe sometime we spik, eh? *Carai!* I know lots o' t'ings that you—"

Peggy struggled to her elbow. "Yes?" she cut in angrily. "Well, keep 'em! I know lots of things, too. If Pete was a smuggler, what of it? He's a sight better off'n you are this minute. You ain't got no call pestering me 'cos you was his pardner, have yer?"

The fellow bared his white teeth in an oily smile.

"Maybe no. But, a good frien', eh? Look! I fine out one *Americano inspectador,* gover'men' man, come. He look for you now, *señora!* He wan' fine that $17,000 *contrabando* that Pete hide. Pete is dead, but you hees wife! Thees gover'men' feller t'ink you know. *Caramba!* What you do?"

A long silence fell. Crushed by this new intelligence and the startling informer's argument, Peggy could only stare at him. She stared much as she had upon the occasion of Pete's passing.

Machado, on the other hand, seemed the concentration of watchfulness. His eyes had narrowed to pinpoints of light that flashed over her face—diabolical keenness and greed in their depths. At length, as though touched by her distress, he moved away.

"I go now," he told her gently; "you frien' migh' come. I see you soon an' maybe we spik, no? Ennyway, I weel help you if you wan'. You t'ink it over. *Adios.*" He was gone before she could frame a reply.

Then, for an hour, Peggy gave herself over to thoughts of this new worry.

So this was Pete's heritage to her! It had not sufficed that she had put up with a live alcoholic, but that she must now suffer for the deeds of a dead rogue. Who would have believed it of Pete?

For all his vices, she had credited him with honesty—a man worthy of every consideration for being his own worst enemy. Now, the revenue officers were after her because Pete had been a smuggler, and she the wife of a smuggler.

She thought of Feliciano Machado, a scheming, conscienceless rascal, given, no doubt, to the enjoyment of his own ends. He had been a sharer in her husband's ill-gotten gains, posed in the light of a partner, and was pursuing her with the license of their illicit intimacy.

She pondered on his words and his mysterious manner, and stood convinced that, however true his warning it was yielded conditionally for the masking of certain purposes whose nature she was not to know, but in whose fulfilment she must assist.

After, with the recollections of his many professions of friendship and his seeming eagerness to aid her, the premonition she had had when she first saw him recurred to her.

The very fact that he had come to gain her cooperation in some plan, and had departed empty-handed, without doing more than to shed a new light upon certain things and conditions that she had heretofore accepted as truths, proved to her mind that his proposal had been of such an evil nature that he had hesitated to tell her lest it might meet with speedy rejection.

And, thinking over her plight, she decided to defy this Mexican. She asked no help from him. Why should she ask help from any one? She was innocent of any wrong-doing; he was a self-acknowledged criminal.

If he made to retaliate, as she felt

certain he would for not acceding to his demands, she would use his own weapons against him.

However, since he had set no time for his return, it was evident that there was little danger of the government inspector's early arrival. As matters stood, Machado would rather be inclined to take precautionary steps to insure her safety, in the expectation of winning her patronage.

She sighed wearily, while there arose in her mind more proofs of Pete's duplicity. Again, came the significance of his prolonged visits to Sand Dyke Bar, his sprees, and the tales of Dr. Lencia's hospitality.

Machado had upheld the good character of the physician to the point of branding Pete a liar. He had maintained that Lencia really sought to bring her husband to an understanding of his shortcomings, and would have had her believe the practitioner a paragon of rectitude. She sneered her skepticism.

No doubt he was a swashbuckler of the first water, since, as far as she knew, he boasted only the tributes of a scamp and—Pete. In short, it was Pete's word against Machado's, and, in her opinion, Dr. Lencia remained the profligate.

Of the alleged trips to Sand Dyke Bar she was not so certain. It occurred to her that they had been altogether too frequent, a circumstance which caused her no little concern, inasmuch as she cared to keep Pete's memory green with some proof of his veracity.

But, looking back over the past five years, she saw only too plainly that he had been continually absent from home, sometimes two weeks at a time, and, while he did nothing, always had money.

She had questioned him more than once and he had told her of his proficiency with cards—and a successful gambler was not to be despised. Then, within the last year, it had been Dr. Lencia.

The suspicion would not down, and Machado's statements pressed upon her for recognition as truths.

Was it possible that for five years she had believed the manufactured narratives of this man, her husband, while he smuggled over the border, a tool to Jim Miles, the very man who had accomplished her disgrace in Dugout?

And was she to be further hounded by the third member of this villainous crew, this black demon, whose badge of identification was a canvas coat—her love-gift to a supposedly honest man?

She was still in the grip of these tormenting thoughts when footsteps reached her ears. A moment later she was looking into the kindly face of her host.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly, tossing a string of grouse on the table, and standing his gun in a corner. "How is our sick lady and her appetite? I had exceptional luck today, and they're as fat as butter-balls. Open your mouth—bully. Now, the pulse. Heavens alive, what a convalescent! I dare say the profession would be pastime itself were its clientele blessed with your recuperative powers."

He talked on, telling her of the glorious sunrise upon the vast desert to the east, the richness of chromatic blends, and the witchery of distance and earth outline.

"I spent some time looking at the spot where I first met you," he said tentatively, deviating from his descriptive discourse. "Have you thought over the circumstances?"

She smiled faintly. "A little. I don't know just how you found me, or much of anything except that I'll never be able to pay you back. I would have died out there."

While she spoke, she marveled at her articulation. Unconsciously, she had fallen back upon her schoolday grammar, in obedience to the human conceit that bids us give token of our

good breeding to one another upon the occasions of first acquaintanceships.

He dismissed her expression of gratitude with a sportive wave of his hand and flung a leg over the table-edge.

"You flatter me, and yet I deserve it for the great stroke of good fortune that permitted me to be on hand to help you. For, generally, I am hunting—in fact, always hunting. However, I found you. You had evidently fainted, cutting your temple on a rock.

"I brought you here on my horse, a matter of eight miles. Subsequently, nervous shock and loss of blood developed a violent fever. That's about all save the fact that I could have found no more pleasurable occupation in the past four weeks than the one of making you well."

"Four weeks!" gasped Peggy. "Have I been here—"

His large eyes sparkled good-humoredly.

"You have, Mrs. Gilbert—you see, I even know your name. I am particularly thankful to your delirium for this, for it was owing to my discovery of who you were that decided me against seeking relief for you in the Dugout Hospital. I—well, I preferred to give you my personal attention. Perhaps you have heard of me. I'm Dr. Lencia, of Sand Dyke Bar."

For an interval Peggy's heart appeared to stand still. Because of the mist that rose before her eyes she closed them, while she muttered some acknowledgment and feigned weariness the better to hide her agitation.

Yet even in her extremity she felt that her benefactor was looking at her, and that there was a queer insinuation in the look. A moment after he was arranging the bedclothes.

"I am sorry," she heard him say. "I've just worn you out with my prattle. It's certainly unprofessional of me." Following which, from the subdued sounds in the kitchen side of the house, she knew he prepared the meal.

Then, for many minutes, Peggy struggled with her bewilderment. Could she credit her ears? Did the Dr. Lencia of her imagination, the quack, the shameless sot, the man who had spirited her husband away on periodical carousals, and whom she had blamed for his death, really find being in this courtly, clean-cut, strong-limbed stranger? The antithesis was too pronounced, too shocking, for off-hand acceptance.

What had she said, how little had she left unsaid, in her criticism of him? Humiliation and remorse came with remembrance. She had run the gamut of ugly language, characterizing him in terms that were anything but laudable, and had once almost determined to horsewhip him into repudiating Pete's friendship.

Yet here was this same Dr. Lencia, the man who had rescued her from certain, horrible death, had given her the advantages of his professional services, attention and care, and whose very speech and action served to make her welcome more complete.

After all, Machado had spoken the truth, and such an avowal she could not make for her own husband. This was why and when the last remnant of her faith in Pete died.

Now, let it not be understood that Peggy Gilbert was a woman of poor affection. She was, on the contrary, warm-hearted, trusting, and constant to the degree of overzealousness where the object of her sympathy was concerned.

For years she had clung to a sinking ship, searching the horizon of the future, day after day, for some sail of hope that did not come.

Pete was much the idol of her girlhood. She had humored him, petted him, forgiven him, followed him about in his ne'er-do-well career, and loved him. This had been in the glorious hey-day of their first few married years.

In due time she stumbled on the truth, a fearful truth, and it perched itself upon her brain like a nightmare, and stayed. Pete was a born drunkard,

in whom responsibility of any sort did not exist.

From that moment she fought to awaken such pride as he had; she fought, also, for a response from his will. She fought hard, stubbornly—appealing, supplicating, striving to snatch him from the destruction that must drag her with him. In return he made promises and took pledges, and they were trash.

Failing in this direction, she took up more compelling weapons, and cast love in the background. Times without number they clashed, she rating, abusing, denouncing him; but, after every clash, Pete would wabble home with the same blear eyes and the same noisy hiccups.

And when she looked around for the love that she had neglected, she found it dead in the quagmire of discord and discouragement.

Such had been her life with Pete Gilbert. She had glanced back over the course again and again, and wondered why she held so faithfully to her vows. If there had been one little gleam of hope, one fleeting rift in the black, interminable to-morrow to have encouraged her.

But there was neither. The curse was there to stay, and, besides blasting her happiness, was gathering away from her that next dearest possession—the charms of her femininity, molding her into what she believed a hard, coarse, hateful vixen.

Therefore, in the light of all these things, it should be a matter of no great consequence that from considering Dr. Lencia she fell to regretting that Pete had not been of his caliber.

Little though she had seen of him, she admired this man. His was a strong, uplifting nature as distinctively refined as she had believed it to be, following her inspection of her quarters that morning.

Far from joining in her husband's revels, he would have discouraged them, even as Machado said he had, with the artful counsels of a friendly physician. If Pete had only been like him how different would have been their lives!

Now, that he was gone, the sole memory that she would have of him was better forgotten. The law would settle with Jim Miles, and as for Machado—yes, *she* would settle with him.

She opened her eyes as her companion announced the meal. He was standing a pace away, surveying her with a look so full of admiration and pity that she colored in confusion and turned her head. His words, however, smoothed over her embarrassment.

"I've used up every ounce of ingenuity to give you something worth eating," he smiled, going back to the stove and the frying grouse. "It's difficult, though, for any cook to improve upon wild game, since its relish is its most enjoyable feature. I have found that the use of spices more often ruin than improve it."

They lingered for a long time over their food—she propped in bed, with the carving-board for a tray, he seated beside her, his plate in his lap. While they ate he talked.

To Peggy he seemed the very fountainhead of information. In all her experience she did not remember having ever known such genuine pleasure in abstract narration. Nor was the interest attaching to it lessened in the least by the range of subjects over which it traversed.

Following an adventure among the pearl fisheries of the west Mexican coast, she would be favored with some traditional episode of California's missionary days.

Quaint Indian legends and tragic arctic tales would give place to some humorous incident of every-day city life.

He took her through the untraveled wilds, painting word-pictures for her of the great timber-ranges and mighty rivers so vividly as to convey the full power of their alluring charms.

But carried away though she was by these glimpses into another world of

men and things other than her own, she could not help observing his earnest desire to interest her.

Always he was painstaking in his description, asking her if she understood, and when there dwelt a doubt in her mind, simplifying his meaning by familiar comparison and commonplace phrase.

And so it was, that from admiring Dr. Lencia for the high standard of his character, Peggy developed a fond appreciation for his many little attentions and kindnesses.

The sun was dropping behind the cañon-rim when he got to his feet. Surprise showed on his face, changing to a quizzical stare which he bent upon her.

"Well, I declare! I've done nearly half a day's talking. Shall I wash the dishes and start dinner?" He burst into a merry laugh, in which she joined.

"No, I wouldn't be that hard on you, doctor," she responded seriously after a little. "I— You've told me some wonderful things. I feel as if I have been really living them, as if—well, as if the world is good, after all." She looked wistfully at the shadowing hillside.

He came back from bearing away the remnants of the repast and took a seat at the foot of the cot.

"The world is a most delightful reality, Mrs. Gilbert," was his grave comment. "We cannot blame the world as a whole for our disappointments and sorrows, no more than we can expect it to be miserable because we are. Life is made up of contrasts.

"We are well because there is a chance of being sick, rich because poverty does exist, and so on down the long line. You will note that these contrarieties make for a better world, since none of us fancies being sick or poor or unhappy all our lives.

"So we struggle on and on, always aiming toward the attainment of some certain ideal condition whose possession we very much desire."

Peggy was silent. She was thinking of her life with Pete, and how she had used up all her energies and ingenuity to no purpose. And as though he guessed the direction of her thoughts, Dr. Lencia continued, with becoming gentleness:

"I had Pete's body removed to Dugout. I believed that preferable to a grave in this lonely waste—and that you might be pleased."

Tears welled into her eyes and she bowed her head; yet she was glad that her emotion freed her from the necessity of admitting her knowledge of his act or to deceive him by a manifestation of surprise.

In the first instance it would lead to an embarrassing explanation, wishing, as she did, out of respect for Pete's memory, to keep him in ignorance of Machado's visit; and, in the second, her esteem of him had reached that degree where insincerity is akin to a hurt.

But his action, following her display of feeling, was unexpected, almost out of keeping with the situation. Ere she knew it, he had her hands in his and was pouring terms of endearment into her ear.

"Peggy, listen. If only for a moment let me speak," he pleaded, his voice shaken with fervor. "I know this is neither the time nor the place. I know that I am taking an unfair advantage of you—but, I love you, Peggy. From the day I brought you here, bleeding and insensible, I have watched over you, loving you more and more, dear, until now, as the hour of our parting draws near, I cannot bear to have you go. I cannot give you up, sweetheart. Say that you love me in return."

He stopped, his large eyes filled with yearning, centered hungrily upon her face.

In a flutter of sudden alarm Peggy wrenched loose from him. She shrank away, pale and trembling, her bosom heaving rapidly, one arm upraised in a tragic gesture of repulsion.

He saw the gesture and noted the incredulity and fright in her look, and arose. Even in her trepidation Peggy was aware that the cheer that made his

face so rich in expression faded into a woful seriousness. Abstractedly, he caught up his hat.

"I am very much ashamed of myself, Mrs. Gilbert," he apologized. "I hope you will forget I ever spoke to you so. In future I wish to enjoy your friendship and confidence, while you may rest assured of my knowing my place well enough to keep it. I meant to tell you that I am occupying your teepee tent. It is within call, not over six paces off."

For a moment Peggy could not answer. She watched him walk toward the entrance, a trace of dejection in his movements that touched her almost against her will. He would have stepped out, but she called to him.

"Dr. Lencia, I—please." As he swung around she continued: "I wanted to thank you for looking after my husband, and—I'm lonesome. I don't like to stay alone."

Flustered at the boldness of her words she could not look at him after this. She lay with closed eyes, while he retraced his steps, lighted the candle, and took a seat near her.

"I have turned into a genuine simpleton, haven't I?" he said, unmistakable pleasure in his tones. "As far as my poor services in your behalf are concerned I would gladly perform them again. By the way, speaking of our mutual troubles, here's something that will interest you. The storekeeper at Dugout, Jim Miles, has been arrested.

"There are two charges against him —smuggling and manslaughter. The latter has to do with Pete's death, I believe. Concerning the former — he was taken by some special agent of the Treasury Department for being the 'fence' and ringleader of a gang—that, I understand, has been operating over the border for a number of years.

"Uncle Sam is a mighty severe relative when you cross him. He is unrelenting, and, strange to say, has the disagreeable habit of getting whoever he goes after. I remember on one occasion in the Blackfoot country in Montana— Pardon me, did you speak?"

On the verge of collapse Peggy, however, rallied desperately, simulating a violent coughing spell, to which her companion responded with a dipper of water. But the interruption served to discourage further talk, and thereafter he lit a cigarette and mused, blowing smoke wreaths at the tent roof.

To Peggy his silence was a welcome relief. Her mind floundered, and she was drawn by a fearful fascination to a rehearsal of her predicament. For predicament it now really was.

Machado was again right. He had mentioned the presence of a government man in the neighborhood, and with equal positiveness declared that he searched for her. Dr. Lencia corroborated the first part of the statement —might there not be truth to the second?

She reasoned out its likelihood with a sinking heart, for it struck her that the Mexican, because of his standing as culprit, would find it essential to his interests to keep informed of his enemy's movements.

She had no doubt that this he did through his many compatriots scattered along the frontier.

What then must she do? Instinctively her thoughts turned to the physician —that good friend who had but now made known his love for her. She deliberated upon confiding in him, placing herself under his guidance, and carrying out his injunctions.

However, the realization that this would mean the addition of greater disgrace upon her dead husband's memory, entailing as it did a complete admission of his guilt, caused her to dismiss the notion.

Dr. Lencia must never know, she decided, and experienced a strange anxiety over the fact that she might lose in his estimation were he to learn of Pete as a lawbreaker.

Besides, how could she hope to convince him of her innocence, since she would be making a plea for his pro-

tection, which was nothing less than a tacit acknowledgment of her guilt?

And yet, uppermost in her brain was the fear of the law, the feverish desire to fly, to lose herself, to take any means for self-acquittal except the prescribed one of facing the law. Herein lay her dread.

While she knew nothing of Pete's illegitimate operations, to what amount of trouble might she not be put to prove her innocence? In her simple way she recognized the law as a Nemesis that made no pretense at fairness, and though she remembered having heard that a wife's position entitled her to a liberal consideration from this law, she sensed the possibility of some condition that stood to make her the scapegoat since Pete was dead.

Reasoning thus, the dilemma offered little hope of solution save that of flight. She would get her bearings, find the road leading to Calaverite and follow it.

There was a prospector's camp the first night's stop out of Dugout, she had understood Pete to say. The next minute Machado's proffer of help rose in her mind like a leveled finger showing a way, and leaped into instant eminence.

Now she wished that the Mexican might come, and grew restless in the thought that he might forget his appointment, or be kept from fulfilling it.

Later, when she opened her eyes, Dr. Lencia still occupied his seat. She could not see his face, buried as it was in his hands, but some inner sense told her that his reflections were of her, and that they were joyless ones.

And, with the knowledge of this, a wave of contrition swept over her. Well she knew that she had been blinding herself to the real issue, that she was thrusting aside the promptings of her heart that pleaded the cause of this man.

If she went, it would mean the end. Since she could not explain the reason for her departure, she must await her chance and slip away—the act of an ingrate and a coward, and one that must militate against her ever again seeing him.

She moved, and he looked up in a preoccupied way.

"I just waited up to ask you if you would care for a little lunch," he informed her; "and, also, that if you should want anything during the night, not to be backward about calling me. I've kept a candle burning ever since you came. It's far more cheerful than being in the dark."

Peggy found it difficult to reply. She mumbled her inability to eat and thanked him, while in the extremity of her compunction she wished ardently that he might cease his good offices, neglect her even, if only to give her sufficient excuse for leaving.

Afterward she heard him moving about in the other tent, and allowed his solicitude for her comfort to expostulate in his favor. Then, as the night closed in silent as the tomb, she sank into a deep slumber, and dreamed of the Mexican who was to be her savior and of Federal officers in quest of a contraband cache.

How long she slept, she never clearly knew. Her first impression was a violent tugging at her sleeve, and of her name being whispered repeatedly.

Awakening, her heavy eyes fell upon the figure crouching beside the bed, and, as her understanding of who it was filtered into her brain, she shrank away with a cry of dismay.

Against the wall of the tent she huddled, the blankets clutched close about her. It was the evil-faced Machado.

He knelt, his manner suggestive of intense excitement, gesticulating madly with one black hand for silence, and uttering a current of disconnected jargon in which the stipulations *"Importante, señora!"* and, "I go right 'way!" alone were intelligible.

At last, when it seemed likely that she would listen to him, he leaned toward her, his shiny face alight with devilish triumph.

"I haf' to come to-nigh', shuah, Señora Gilbert. I haf' tell you thees man here is Dr. Lencia. You know dat? *Bueno!* You know thees Dr.

Lencia is the gover'men' man, the *inspectador?* A-h-h, you no know it, eh? How I know? *Mira!* I get thees letter-rs."

So saying, he drew two folded sheets of paper from the bosom of his shirt, opened one and laid it before her. "Read 'im, queek! You see."

But, Peggy made no immediate move to comply. Instead, she regarded him narrowly, trying to find some flaw in his apparent earnestness that might hint at deception.

But, there was none, and as the full tenor of his words burst upon her, aided by a fearful belief that the charge was true, she took the letter and turned it to the light and read:

EL PASO, August 19, 1887.

DR. ARCHIE LENCIA,
Sand Dyke Bar, Arizona.

DEAR SIR:

Agent E wires this division from Hermosa, Sonora, of big preparations under way by gang. Keep sharp lookout on Gilbert and Machado. Better bank on Jim Miles, Dugout City. Notify Marshal Heppard and redouble vigilance along the line.

Yours,

J. W.

"You see!" hissed Machado, his eyes snapping fire. "Thees Dr. Lencia is the *inspectador* lak' I tole you. Here, thees letter moch better."

He tendered the second communication, and Peggy, forgetting her dread of him in the surge of conflicting emotions that rose within her, snatched it fiercely from his hand.

Then, as she read, little tremblings ran over her, and the man noting them, watched her with a certain degree of cunning which told that he counted particularly upon some outward expression of her feelings.

ALGODONES, Arizona, Sept. 4, 1887.

DR. ARCHIE LENCIA,
Sand Dyke Bar, Arizona.

DEAR SIR:

Regret to report that white man and greaser got past, though instructions were carried out to the letter. Received word from Mexican customs authorities that haul will reach $17,000. I think it would be worth your while to work on Gilbert's wife. They don't get along. However, it's certain this last cargo was cached. A friend of Gilbert's told me to-day he met him traveling light near the mouth of Tecolote Cañon yesterday. Will use every effort pending the arrival of your orders. Regretfully,

AGENT E.

Peggy met her visitor's eyes, her own wide and filled with a wild light. She made no comment. The naked truth stood out too boldly, too significant of everything that she dreaded, to make even coherent thought possible.

Quite the reserve, she was terrified, sensible only that in that hideous human, Machado, there remained a forlorn hope of delivery for her.

"You t'ink, now, Dr. Lencia gover'men' man, no? I tole you $17,000 di'monds, *cigarros,* silk in *contrabando,* eh? I no lie. Thees doctor he hole you, *señora.* When you well, he take you weeth him. Shuah, he mos' fine the smoggled goods. *Caramba!* He make you tell heem where they is. Don' you see? Take you to the jodge an' make you tell where Pete he hide 'im?"

The implication in his tones and manner, as he purred over this last, was glaring. It stung her into sudden comprehension and started the hot blood rioting in her veins.

"Do you mean that I know?" she flared suddenly. "Is that what you're driving at?"

The fellow's lip curled in utter disdain. He avoided a direct answer by introducing a new and far more important element. His manner changed correspondingly:

"You remember I say thees mornin', I lak' help you—you my frien'? Orright, I tell you now, somet'ing. Pete an' me good frien's. We come weeth thees $17,000 *contrabando.*

"I see Pete thees night ac' funny, but I t'ink maybe his drunk. I go sleep, wake up nex' day, an' every-t'ing gone. I follow queek but I don'

see 'im. *Carajo!* You call that righ'? When he rob me?

"Now, thees way I help you, *señora.* I got two horse near here, now, one for you an' one for me, eh? Pete he die, an' Jim Miles mebbe the *inspectador* get' im. Ver' well.

"You go from here to-nigh' weeth me. I take you, but nobody know where, 'cos I know thees countr-ry. In fife minutes you go, an' you weel be safe from govern'men' mans, but you mos' tell me where is thees *contrabando* first. Pete tole you, an' you know. What you say?"

For many seconds Peggy was speechless with disappointment and rage. Was this the support she had expected? To have a scoundrel make terms with her as if she were one of his kind! To be accused as the custodian of tainted merchandise by a thief, because of the closeness of her relationship to another thief!

Machado was gloating over her, seemingly anticipating her acceptance of the conditions, when she found her tongue.

"Say, you!" she hissed, pointing toward the tent entrance; "d'you see that door? Well, get out, and stay out! If you don't, I'll call Dr. Lencia! Get out, I said!"

With a muttered imprecation, the Mexican rose to his feet. There was a baleful glitter in his eye.

"So!" he gritted viciously. "I know why you no wan' tell me. You like thees Dr. Lencia, an' you goin' try to tell heem, no? You t'ink he let you go free. But, no, sir! Thees *contrabando* is mine, you un'stand? Pete he steal it, but now it is mine!

"An' you goin' tell me where is it! Look! *Santa Maria!* You no tell me, right 'way, I keel thees *gringo,* Dr. Lencia! See, I keel heem!"

He whipped out a six-shooter and flourished it before her face.

After this he stood, a horrible, menacing creature, while paralyzed with terror at the tragic turn of affairs, Peggy could only stare at him dumbly. An interval passed, painfully slow. Then, by degrees, one thought assumed enormous proportions in the woman's mind, clamored at her nerve centers, and quickened her heart like a mad stimulant—Dr. Lencia.

Cold grew her body, as she spurred up her faculties to meet the frightful emergency. She must thwart this monster, helpless though she was. The advisability of raising an alarm suggested itself, but she dismissed it summarily.

Machado would stop at nothing. He would kill her, even, as a means of carrying out his revenge. Further, since he had been so desperately bold as to make known his intentions, she could not, now, hope to parley with him save by yielding to his demands. He was of the race that follows up an advantage to a passionate extreme.

Yet, it was along this very line of thought that she evolved a plan. It was a desperate plan, and while its risk froze her blood at the consequences of failure, it pointed a sure way out of the dilemma.

Again Machado spoke.

"Well, you goin' tell me?" he breathed hoarsely. "Horry up! Spik, or I feex him—you too! What you say!"

Peggy nodded.

"Yes, I—I will. But, I'm—I'm sick, can't you see? I—can't take you to where—where the things are hid. I'll—I'll make you out a—a map, if you want."

An expression of filthy greed replaced the ferocity in the Mexican's face. His mustache bristled odiously under the impulse of his malevolent smile.

"Go on, make 'im. An' queek, too!" he commanded, backing to the center of the room.

Drawing a blanket around her, Peggy got out of bed. Weakly she made her way to the table, pulled open the drawer, and took out a sheet of

paper. She searched the compartment further, then turned to the man.

"Don't stand there like a bump on a log, you!" she snapped. "Gimme a pencil!"

Machado looked suddenly worried.

"I no got a pencil. Maybe thees doctor—"

"You're a fine smuggler!" she cut in, seemingly in a fury. "Look on that shelf yonder.

She directed him to a point near the foot of the bunk.

It was a shrewd move, and her methods for accomplishing it were calculated to throw a more suspicious nature than Machado's off its guard.

She did not see, however, the strange flicker that entered his eyes; neither did she notice that when he turned to follow out her instructions his action was apparently secondary to the motive—as if he conformed to some requirement in the performance of a part.

The instant his back was toward her she caught up the shotgun left by Dr. Lencia after his grouse-hunting trip that morning, and brought it into position across her hip. The Mexican swung around at the click of the hammer.

"Now," she said, aloud, a hard ring in her tones. "Drop that gun! I won't tell you again!"

With a torrent of his native oaths, the man obeyed. As the weapon clattered to the floor Peggy picked it up and edged around her prisoner to the tent entrance.

"Dr. Lencia!" she shouted. But there was no answer. She repeated the call, again and again, louder, and with rising impatience born of a fearful suspicion that all was not right.

At last, when it was certain that her endeavors were being wasted, she stepped close to her captive. He had been watching her sullenly.

"Did you—did you—do anything to him?" Her face was white and set, coarse almost with intense ferocity.

He made no reply, yet seemed to display more interest than alarm over the sudden change in her demeanor.

"If you did," she cried, fastening him with a sinister stare and hooking the revolver into his side, "you'll suffer for it! Go on out there! Go on!"

Her manner was too suggestive of rash determination to make prudent any course except obedience, and Machado, to all appearances impelled by the knowledge of the six-shooter directed at his back, swaggered into the night.

A few paces off, looming in the darkness, stood the pyramid tent. Peggy halted the fellow before its open flap.

"Dr. Lencia—please."

But, again, there was no response, and believing her worst fears to have found confirmation, she dropped impulsively to her knees with a cry.

Like a flash the Mexican darted away. He burst into the willows with the crash of a bolting steer, and his captor realizing the blunder into which her emotions had led her, took quick aim at the disappearing figure and pulled the trigger. Six times she pulled and as many times did it snap. The cylinder was empty!

Then followed a minute of feverish haste. A sweep of her hand over the cramped quarters of the tent told Peggy that Dr. Lencia was absent.

Deep relief accompanied this discovery, even while the thought went charging through her brain that with Machado's escape she had now a vigorous, treacherous enemy with whom to cope.

No doubt at that very instant he was listening, spying upon the camp, for indications of Dr. Lencia's presence. He would not be long in surmising that she was alone. Then would he bend his energies toward getting the upper hand of her. Besides, the unloaded revolver. Did he know it was unloaded?

She measured the distance to the lighted tent-house, crept part of the way and leaped the rest. Not until

she again had possession of the shotgun, did she breathe easier.

Afterward, it was only the work of a moment to hurry into her shoes and pin the blanket more securely around her. This done, she turned to extinguish the candle, her judgment cautioning her to seek the darkness, when she remembered that she had made no examination of her weapon. Accordingly, she threw open the breech. As in the case of Machado's six-shooter, it was without shells!

Peggy grew sick with consternation. Feebly at first, then desperately, she forced herself into a search of her quarters for ammunition, but without result.

At last, she snuffed the light and stole out to the other tent. Here she continued her exploration, but not one shell could she find.

Exhausted, yet determined to carry out her original intentions, she took up a position just within the teepee and kept a sharp eye upon the cañon-bed.

Then the minutes dragged by filled with the noises of the coming dawn. And while she gave keen ear to every sound, she made a mental review of the night's events and the staggering disclosures that had sprung from them.

Dr. Lencia, her benefactor, the man for whom she had felt such immediate esteem and liking, and who had spoken his heart to her so fervently, stood revealed as the Federal officer —the self-same special agent for whom she had entertained such horror, and from whose clutches she had planned to escape.

There was no fear in her heart, now. Rather was there a deep sense of disappointment, and a burning shame that she had allowed herself to be captivated so easily by one whose only interest in her was the execution of a sworn duty.

It was hard to believe that every manifestation of solicitude, the confession of love, even, that had embarrassed while it pleased her, was given solely to win her confidence that it might be later betrayed.

Yet, from every indication, this was evidently the truth. Dr. Lencia cared nothing for her. He was not of her plane. Why should he deign to give her more than a glance when, without doubt, the fairest of womankind would be happy to sue for his favor?

She was only plain Peggy Gilbert. Like a desert weed was she, tough of fiber, unbeautiful, and unblessed with any worthy qualities except that of being able to live in the face of the worst and make the living worth while.

She was a toiler, that's what she was, ready and willing to carve a home from the rough block of poverty, to fashion it from the scraps of a hand-to-mouth existence.

Would Dr. Lencia be likely to find admiration for the possessor of such a mean dower? The answer was unconditional. As well hope to brighten the sun with a cabbage.

But it was one thing to know that her feelings had been outraged, and quite another to work up resentment against the author of the wrong. She gazed dry-eyed over the spectral landscape when she could have wept in utter abandonment.

The letters were incontestable proofs of her paragon's deceit. They told the story of her husband's lawlessness and incriminated her. She was regarded as a conspirator alone knowing, now that Pete was dead, the whereabouts of a cargo of smuggled goods.

Nor were her troubles to end here. Feliciano Machado also believed in her guilt and had shown his hand in no uncertain way. He was as much her enemy as was Dr. Lencia, although one whom she had greater reason to fear, since he was influenced by pecuniary greed.

While it was obvious that he had revealed the true character of the practitioner in the expectation that she would, through dread of the law, confide in him the hiding place of the

contraband, it was equally certain that his failure would serve only to redouble his energies to force her to his demands.

With the Federal officer on the one side and this Mexican on the other, how could she hope to escape? Each wanted her. Indeed, instead of the situation clearing, it had become more intricately involved.

And as a result of these thoughts came the threat against her benefactor's life. Machado would make good this threat, if only to impress her with his strength of purpose.

Besides, what better means could he find for the attainment of his evil desires than to rid himself of Dr. Lencia? With the medico out of the way she would be completely in his power.

The longer she reflected upon this, the greater became her anxiety over her host's welfare. Regardless of her own danger, she must protect this man who had been good to her, enemy though he was.

She prayed that he might come, even while she fought down a score of frightful notions. Machado might knife him in the dark—might have already knifed him!

Again and again she lamented the fact that she had no shotgun shells, yet never reasoned what she could have done with them.

It was after daybreak when Dr. Lencia arrived. He came up-cañon at a brisk walk, a parcel under his arm.

As he neared the wall-tent, she noticed that he stepped gingerly as if he feared to wake her, also, that he threw a glance at the interior. A moment after he was shouting into the morning.

"Peggy! Where are you, Peggy?"

And because of her shattered nerves and her weak state, but particularly because there seemed a real note of alarm in the voice that spoke her name so familiarly, Peggy fell back on the pillow in the teepee-tent and sobbed.

He heard her, and an expression crossed his face like that of a man who reaches a conclusion not much to his liking.

The following moment he was kneeling beside her, soothing her with gentle words, while his eyes traveled from the heavy breech-loader to her face in perfect understanding.

He raised her in his strong arms, and carried her back to her bed, then for a long time he sat and stroked her hand. Later, when she ceased weeping, he measured out a draft from a bottle and steadied her as she drank.

"I'm a beast to leave you alone," he asserted bitterly. "I promise it won't happen again. I took an exerciser to the line-rider's camp, six miles from here. I had ordered strawberries for you and was afraid they might go bad. In future, I'll stay at home evenings. Now, tell me the trouble, Peggy. You were armed. It's fair that I should know."

There was but one way to explain the circumstance—deceive him! She had not considered the other side of the question, but it was plain that Machado would henceforth give the locality a wide berth in the belief that she would warn Dr. Lencia of his intentions.

Therefore, nothing would be gained by the truth. On the contrary, the Mexican's visit might only serve to fasten suspicion more strongly upon her, or, if not that, to hasten the hour when she must see her benefactor in his guise of Federal officer—an hour she now dreaded as fully as she did that which would bring it about. Unwittingly, the lie came to her lips.

"I had a fearful nightmare, doctor," she said, closing her eyes lest he might read the deception in their depths. "It was silly of me, but I was so sure you were about to be murdered, that—well, I stood guard—waited for you. And the gun wasn't loaded."

He laughed heartily over this last.

"And the gun wasn't loaded, eh?"

he repeated after a while, thoughtfully contemplating the magpie, who, having escaped from his cage, was making an expert inspection of the strange six-shooter on the table.

It was Machado's six-shooter, abandoned by Peggy following her fruitless quest for cartridges.

"No," she answered weakly. "I didn't know where you kept your shells. I'm ashamed of myself."

Again he laughed, supplementing:

"And I, of myself. As a matter of fact I hid them—intentionally."

A painful silence fell, save for the chatter of the magpie. That wise fellow was giving vent to his ill-temper over his inability to run his head into the bore of the revolver.

He would work his beak in, draw it out, and screw his eye into the orifice. He did this many times. At last, following a supreme effort, he withdrew his bill with an almost human chuckle of satisfaction; and the object that had caused him such indignation came trailing after—a roll of brown paper scarcely longer than a cigarette.

The man, whose glance had been wandering from the weapon to the woman's face with an expression half of pity, half of unbelief, reached over and relieved the bird of his find.

He unfolded it, smoothed it out across his knee, and prepared to study the pencil marks that covered one side. But, with his first glance he sprang to his feet and grabbed his hat.

"I'll return in an hour," he called over his shoulder, pausing at the tent-opening. "Don't be afraid. See if you can't pacify Feathers. After to-day he'll be worth more than his weight in gold."

When the sun rose upon the tent, Peggy got up, and feeling equal to perform some light share of the camp's duties, started the fire and proceeded to get breakfast.

But, though she knew that Dr. Lencia would hail this little labor with his customary enthusiasm, there was a heavy weight upon her heart that robbed the service of the pride that would have otherwise been hers.

She had lied to him, and he knew that she had lied. The shame of it. Why had she not told him the truth? He might have expected such treatment from Machado, but her whom he had sheltered, cared for—yes, she owed her very life to him—where was there a more glaring ingratitude, a fuller example of treachery?

And here she had allowed him to leave when there was a possibility of the Mexican still lurking in the neighborhood. However, she assured herself, the smuggler was too cowardly to attack by day.

His game would be to sneak steel into a man's vitals under cover of darkness, when he need have no worry over some chance observer.

Then, too, she remembered Dr. Lencia's significant remark that he had purposely disposed of the shotgun loads. Had he taken this means of protecting himself against her through the thought that she might find out his designs and seek to do away with him? She hardly knew, and she did not care. She would go to-day.

Yes, she would go and find the road to Calaverite as she had formerly intended. Anything was preferable to remaining under this roof where every hour of her stay was beset with worry, and danger, and heartaches.

She left off slicing the bacon, found a pencil and began her note of farewell.

DEAR DR. LENCIA:

When you read this I'll be gone. I want to warn you against a Mexican named Machado, who is here, and who has threatened your life because you are a government man. He has been bothering me to tell him where cartain smuggled goods are hidden. Oh, please, don't believe me guilty. I swear I don't know. This is why I am leaving. I cannot bear to have you think me so terrible, and after all your kindness it is so hard—

She stopped, for the tears had filled her eyes and she could not see. And,

as she waited, struggling with her emotion, the parcel on the table caught her attention.

With trembling fingers she unwrapped it, exposing to view two baskets of luscious strawberries, a box of candy, a crape kimono, and a silk scarf. Dumbly she looked them over, the first gifts she had received since her girlhood days; then she dropped her head upon her arms and cried as if her heart would break.

"He does care," she sobbed.

And so did Dr. Lencia find her. He came into the tent, covered with sweat and dirt, yet with a happy light in his eyes. In the second that he paused upon the threshold, he marked the open package to the weeping figure beside it.

He took a quick step toward her, read the unfinished note at a glance and smiled tenderly. Then, when she did not mind his affectionate touch upon her shoulder, he gathered her gently to him.

"I have been so cruel to you, dear," he breathed into her ear. "I have caused you so many little agonies for the sake of doing my duty. Will you forgive me if I tell you how heartless I have really been?"

"Anything," she answered, nestling closer to him — "anything that you might ever do."

He kissed her again and again, whispering those tuneful words that the lover tells his adored; then:

"I have a surprise in store for you. Wait here until I fetch it; I won't be long."

Peggy waited, and as the minutes went by her mind was a riot of wonderful thoughts. A broad vista of years spread out before her like a golden dream, too strange to be true, too true to be real.

This great-souled fellow, whose every thought of her she now knew to be the embodiment of good, was to redeem her misspent life, to give her that happiness that she had so often craved.

She wept softly from the very fulness of her joy, and while so occupied the sound of a soft footfall reached her ears. She looked up, to meet Machado's vindictive eyes peering at her through the entrance. Placing a finger to his lips for silence, he walked in.

"*Buenos dias, señora,*" he smirked. "Don' be scare; I no tech you. See, I stop here. I goin' 'way; that is for why I come to see you. You glad, no? Oh, Feliciano Machado not bad feller.

"Look, I tell you somet'ing mebbe Dr. Lencia no tell you. You tell lie to heem. You say you haf a dream that somebody try keel heem. That pistol you take from me, look at it. It is Pete's pistol, no?

"It is no dream, *señora.* But Dr. Lencia heem fine the seventeen thousand dollars *contrabando.* You lak Dr. Lencia, no? He lak you, too; but, gee whiz, I lak you better! What you goin' do 'bout it, eh? *Caramba!*

"Peggy, I feel I take you weeth me to Mexico. You say so?"

He stopped, regarded her quizzically for a moment, and continued with a merry laugh: "And should Machado ever force you into such an adventure, dear, it will be only because I consent."

He tore open his dirty jumper at the throat, snatched off his slouch hat, wig, and oily mustache, and stood revealed, but for the swarthy make-up on his face, as the man to whom she had given her heart—Dr. Lencia of Sand Dyke Bar!

"But I can't understand," she told him after he had fondled his way into her forgiveness.

"And with good reason," he agreed, smiling into her eyes, "since certain things require explanation. Listen. Smuggling on the frontier, and I'm assigned to the work. That was a year ago. I met your husband and we discussed the border.

"He knew every inch of it, and I formed an opinion. But months passed without results. One night about four months back he dropped a

hint while in his cups. He bragged in a saloon that only one man knew Tecolote Cañon as well as he, the same being Feliciano Machado.

"I jailed the Mexican on a venture, and he confessed. Then the loss of the seventeen-thousand-dollar consignment — getting by the line-scouts, cached, and all that. I thought I'd take Pete easier.

"The morning I arrived in Dugout, Pete and Miles clash and you leave town. Then I arrest Miles. He accuses Pete of double-dealing—of hiding the contraband.

"Well, I had come prepared to masquerade as Machado, working on the theory that there is always a chance of a prisoner escaping, and that if I couldn't talk Pete into a division of the spoils I would track him to their hiding-place. I overtook you just as the storm broke, you remember, then—" He hesitated, caught her to his breast, and kissed her.

"Are you sure you'll understand my position from what I'm about to say, dear?" he asked earnestly. "It's a mean act, and—" She slipped her hand over his mouth.

"You forget that I told Machado what I thought of you," she laughed, with rising color.

"By George, yes! You did tear into me, didn't you? To continue: Pete was dead, but you, his wife, must have shared his confidences. I made a bold move—robbed you of your outfit to get you in my power. Now I would reason or scare you into a confession.

"But I had not made allowance for the condition in which I found you upon my return. However, I told the line-rider who owns this camp a story and promised I'd leave the place in more desirable shape than he had ever known it if he would rent it and keep away.

"Well, Machado told you the rest, except the fact that I was not long in discovering that for once my sense of duty nearly failed me. I hesitated to broach the subject, and only as the Mexican could I steel myself to the effort.

"I blustered around here, threatened you, bargained to help you escape, gave you proof of my own identity, swore to kill my own self, let you get the upper hand because both guns were empty, and—to find out how much you cared for me. Feathers, here, found the map to Pete's contraband cache in the barrel of Pete's revolver, which I have had in my possession since the day of the cloudburst. As a result I have found the goods—and you."

Peggy flashed him a tearful look and buried her head upon his shoulder.

"I am so happy," she murmured, then added sorrowfully: "Poor Pete. Wasn't there no word, nothing — on the map?"

"Nothing," he said gravely.

Yet, later that day, in the seclusion of the solitude a mile from camp, he thought of Pete Gilbert's last message to his wife and, taking it from his pocket, reread the scrawl:

> I'm goin to kick off from the smash that jim miles give me. what i'm about to say aint cos i care for you, an i dont want you to think it. nuther am i goin to tell you what my line has bin. its none of yer bizness. you kin find out when you git the layout if yer smart enuff. i oughten do this cos you aint worth it. if i hadnt put in some hard knocks gettin them goods, you cud go plum to blazes for all of me. folly this map. if you git nabbed its your own lookout.

Dr. Lencia turned and gazed at the far-stretching sand-flat in the east. He let his eyes travel over its bleak surface thoughtfully.

Leagues away, upon its southern rim, where dark, redoubtable table-mountains rose like tiers of huge benches, the dust spirals romped about in devilish abandon.

"Not 'Poor Pete,'" he muttered positively; "but 'Happy Peggy.'"

THE END.

Big Buffalo's Last Battle

by G. W. Ogden

I.

BIG BUFFALO was his name. He was rheumy-eyed, and his long grizzly hair dangled about his ears. Nobody cared whether he wore a hat or not, but a shirt and overalls were incumbrances of civilization which the Indian agent and the authorities of the town of Comanche forced upon him. He bore them with scornful tolerance, and it was plain that he had assumed them for that visit only.

For the old man was one of the originals. One Horse, the young mission Indian, said Big Buffalo had five white men's scalps, trophies of the old days, hanging in his tent.

No Matter. Big Buffalo appeared harmless enough, dispirited enough, old enough to be handled like a curio out of a cave dwelling. He was prying around the rubbish heap across the lot in front of the tent just then, greatly interested in part of a brick of limburger cheese which the sergeant had thrown away.

It seemed to have considerable charm for Big Buffalo, who turned it with his foot, tentatively at first, and then took it up. Satisfied upon closer inspection that it was a delicacy to adorn his board, or perhaps lured by the tinfoil about it, Buffalo put it in his sack.

"Oh, what a dear, cute old Indian!" said Jennie, hastening in for her camera. Buffalo was clawing over the top of the rubbish pile with his fingers. Thus absorbed, his ears probably confused by the many strange sounds of civilization, he did not hear the tread of Miss Jennie Tree as she slipped up behind him with her devil-box.

Miss Jennie was within ten feet of him—the goal which she was trying for—when Big Buffalo straightened his back, turning squarely around, face presenting. He had seen those black boxes before, and had a vague notion that they took something from a man and fastened it on paper, and he didn't like it at all. He made an astonishingly quick sidewise duck, his free arm fending his face.

"Naw!" growled Buffalo fiercely, giving great steam to the one English word that he knew.

His vehemence startled Jennie, but she snapped him, and the trick was done. She backed away, grinning at Buffalo a little dubiously, for the old man was plainly out of sorts.

"Naw!" said he again, springing forward, dropping his precious sack, making a grab for the camera.

Jennie put it behind her as she backed off, shaking her head. That appeared to puzzle Buffalo, accustomed to imme-

diate obedience from the ladies of his own household. He stopped a moment, as if to consider the matter.

Jennie took advantage of his indecision to bolt for the tent. She arrived there, frightened but triumphant.

"I got him," she panted—"I got him good!" Buffalo came on after her, shaking his fist. Mrs. Tree confronted him before the tent, waving her apron at him in the way that ladies wave their aprons to frighten chickens from the porch.

"Go on, sh-h-h-h-h—get out of here, you ugly old thing!" she shooed, hands under the apron, flaunting the garment at the dingy old Indian as if he were a rooster of extraordinary impertinence.

Big Buffalo stopped, looking at her curiously. But he retained enough dignity to assert his manhood in another grinding "Naw!" whereon Mrs. Tree gave a little jump at him, one of those stiff-kneed, chicken-scaring jumps peculiar to ladies, still waving the dreadful apron.

"Sh-h-h-h, go on—get out of here, you old rascal!" said she. Big Buffalo turned his back, walked to the place where his sack lay, shouldered it, and went his way.

"Well, I declare, I never saw such a bold old thing!" said Mrs. Tree.

"He took that horr-id stuff away with him," shuddered Jennie. "What on earth do you suppose he's going to do with it?"

"Eat it, like as not," said the man from Omaha; "them Arapahoes eats most anything they find."

"But to imagine any living human being eating limburger, and it spoiled!"

"I've got my doubts about it bein' spoiled," defended the sergeant—"and I'm here to tell you he might eat worse."

"Worse!" exploded Mrs. Tree. "Lands of mercy, I don't see where he could find it!"

"Good or bad—and it's never good—that's no dish for a self-respecting old Indian," declared Jennie. "He'll never think as much of himself again afterward."

"Oh, I dunno," said the sergeant loftily: "that cheese has saved many a man's life before to-day."

"Under what circumstances?" demanded Jennie, cocking her head pedantically. "Point out the circumstances, will you, please?"

"Oh, I can't give the names and dates, if that's what you want"—the sergeant seemed to feel deeply on the matter, as if a friend's honor had been assailed—"but I know it has, all right, all right."

"I think if a man went up in a air-o-plane he orto carry a few chunks of it along," offered the engineer. "It'd hold him up if his ingin failed."

"Knock it," said the sergeant bitterly, getting up in a huff, settling his brown derby down against his ears solidly; "go on ahead and knock it. But I tell you that cheese has saved the life of many a man before to-day, and I'm here to stand by it. Some of you may see the day before you die that you'll be proud to meet a dish of it on a free-lunch counter, and I don't mean the ladies when I say that, neither."

Plainly the sergeant was offended. He went away with that, having done his best for the cheese.

"Land sakes!" said Jennie's mother; "land sakes alive!"

The way of it was this: They had come to Comanche, all of them, to register for the drawing soon to take place for the distribution of homesteads in the Indian reservation close at hand.

Comanche sat upon the border of the new domain, and it was a place of wickedness and false promises, fiddles, flat games, flies. Jennie's mother, being a widow, a condition which she tolerated but did not indorse, hoped for a claim in the low numbers.

Likewise the lady dentist from Kansas City; the military gentleman with beer-colored mustache, who said he was a sergeant, but commonly was accredited with a somewhat more obscure rank; and the tall, bony man from Omaha, who claimed that his business was hogs, but who looked as if he had

been used as a chart in a school of osteopathy.

Also the locomotive engineer, who had a month's vacation and was looking around to find a place to light when the final jumping-off time came to him in his trade.

They were messing together in a hired tent—the ladies' part of it curtained off with twenty-ounce canvas. It was cheaper than indiscriminate chuck-hunting in Comanche, and immeasurably more satisfactory.

For Jennie's mother was an amazing cook. Her husband had just sat around and eaten himself into the grave—he had liked her cooking so well. That was about all he cared for. It took up so much of his thought and energy that he hadn't time to look for a job.

She never tired of recounting the pathetic incident of his end, which was induced, if not aggravated in its intensity and hastened in its culmination, by a famous carrot pudding.

He never got enough of that dish but once. And that once, poor soul, was fatal to his future ambitions. He went to his rest full of carrot pudding, satisfaction on his face.

Mrs. Tree had been a woman of means in her time. But feeding a husband who was a full-hand on consumption and a very low power on production had made a hole in the box. The means wouldn't last always, even though they had stretched out far enough to put Jennie through Molly Bawn College—that seat of learning famous around the globe for its fudge.

Now, Jennie had an idea that she might replenish the means and pay interest on her education by going to Wyoming and marrying a romantic rancher—one of the sort that comes in with alkali dust on his shoulders in the dramas of Western life.

That scheme looked sensible to Mrs. Tree. Meantime she might just as well register and draw Claim No. 1, and then sell her relinquishment for a few thousand of easy money. So that was the plan all around.

The sergeant had brought that brick of limburger cheese with him in his valise, with a bag of onions and some rye bread. The sergeant was a plain man who did not waste his money on dining-car waiters. He provisioned himself for all such expeditions as that. And that was the explanation of the limburger's presence in Comanche, which town had not yet risen to the altitudes of culture at which limburger moves to advantage on the market.

When the sergeant unpacked his valise on the third day in camp he removed the limburger, such as there was left of it after his depredations along the journey from Omaha. It asserted its presence in the tent with a silence which was louder than words.

The sergeant, in defense of his ration, contended that it would be all right after it had been given a chance to air. The others insisted that it never would be all right, because it never had been all right, and that cheese of that stamp and character never was all right, no matter under what favorable conditions it was confined.

Reluctantly the sergeant admitted that it might have spoiled. So he cast it upon the rubbish heap, and there it came under the eye of Big Buffalo, once a mighty chief in the councils of his people.

And that was the way Jennie came to get the old gentleman's picture in her little camera, which had the crack in its upper right-hand corner closed with chewing gum. It gave Jennie a great deal of satisfaction, for she looked back on her narrow escape with many thrills.

One Horse came around that afternoon. One Horse was an Arapahoe, and Big Buffalo was a patriarch of that same unfastidious tribe. The adventurers had made the acquaintance of One Horse shortly after their arrival, attracted by the bright feather which he wore tied into his back hair by a piece of colored twine.

Taciturnity of disposition, paucity of words may be common of the red Indian in his native wilds and unadorned

condition, but not so of One Horse. He was One Horse in name, but he was an entire stable in talk. That boy could say more and convey less in fifteen minutes, on the most trivial subject, than the report of a Congressional committee.

The white man had taken him up and put the brand of education on him, and he displayed his attainments at every turn of the road. It was not alone an ample demonstration of the truth which holds a little learning to be a dangerous thing; it proved undeniably that it can become a positive affliction.

One Horse had received the rudiments of his education in the mission school. He had been polished off in the blacksmith shop at the military post near by, and his method of expressing his thoughts was startling sometimes, and again alarming, especially when there were ladies around.

After a good deal of skirmishing, of which there was no need whatever, but which proved that One Horse had the making of a diplomat in him, the young man came around to the point.

He was there as an emissary from Big Buffalo. The old chief resented having his picture taken. He believed that pictures of a strong man made him weak; that pictures of a sane man made him crazy; that pictures of any man whatever were nothing less than that man's spirit in captivity.

And no man wants to live apart from his own proper spirit. It isn't comfortable. So Big Buffalo wanted the black box delivered to him. He wanted to destroy it, and all within it, and set his spirit free.

"Why, what a crazy notion!" said Mrs. Tree.

"Yes," admitted One Horse, serene and lofty in the white man's knowledge of these things; "old man damn fool! Just like little kid, damn fool!"

Everybody said that the request of the ancient man was unreasonable and preposterous. Why, of course she wasn't going to smash up that perfectly good camera, said Jennie, not to please all the old Indian granddads that still survived the ardent waters and flannel underclothing of civilization.

One Horse said of course not—no lady could be expected to do that. He said a great deal more, for he was the original talking Indian. But for all his chatter he left a good impression when he went away to report to Buffalo.

II.

JENNIE started for the Big Wind River, which was not more than a mile away, about the middle of that same afternoon. She wanted a picture of rippling water. Everybody that ever owned a camera wanted a picture of rippling water some time or another. None of them ever got it with the ripples in it just as it looks in the rapids.

No matter, Jennie hadn't tried. And she must have some rippling water. With such a film she could have one of those developing magicians combine it with the Big Buffalo picture. Rippling water would be much more romantic as a background for a chief than a pile of rubbish with broken beer bottles on top of it, and an old rubber boot which she knew perfectly well *would* show.

So communing in her own highly educated mind, Miss Jennie meandered off up the river looking for a ripple. At last she came to it, the loveliest bit of crinkled water that ever laughed in the face of an amateur photographer.

It was exactly what she wanted. Wagon tracks came down to it from the bank on which she stood, lost themselves in its pellucid shallows, emerged on the other side, and wavered off into the gray mystery beyond.

Jennie had some thoughts that they led away, perhaps, to some place where young ranchers with white dust on their shoulders were pining away and growing thin in the face for young ladies of polish and refinement, to fry their bacon and open their canned tomatoes.

It looked fine. It was the very likeliest ripple that Jennie ever had met. She got it in her finder from this point,

from that; from here, from there; trying it all around, knowing very well that it could not get away.

Wagon tracks might come and wagon tracks might go, but that ripple would stay there forever. What had she spent four years in college for if not to be firmly established in the certainty of that? It wasn't like Big Buffalo—it couldn't dodge.

The thought of that queer old man made her laugh. And it was a lonesome sort of place to laugh alone in. She realized that when she heard herself laughing back from across the river.

Jennie focused on the ripple. She planted her heels firmly in the gravel of the sloping bank; she bent over the finder, her hand cupped around it. And as she stood there in the tense concentration of that important moment, a large brown hand reached around from behind her, laid hold of the camera and snatched it away.

Things came fast to Jennie after that. She would have screamed, but another big brown hand was clapped over her mouth, and following the hand a handkerchief, which they sawed between her teeth and tied at the back of her head.

Other brown hands caught her wild-flying arms, and the brown faces belonging to them appeared, solemn-looking, even severe. And the most solemn and severe of all was the face of old Big Buffalo, who stood in front of her, the camera under his arm.

The old chief was assisted by two able young men who wore their hair sleek and shiny over their ears, braided behind like Chinamen.

One of the young men pulled her by the arm to the water's edge and shoved her in. She struck it knee-deep, and he followed, picking her up in his arms. Thus he carried her across, wading, the others coming after.

When he reached the farther shore the young man stood Jennie upon her feet with a grunt that attested to his displeasure. As far as squaws went, to that young man all of them looked alike, and when necessity called upon him to put aside his manhood and the traditions of his race and carry one of them, he meant to serve the occasion only, and not prolong the degradation.

All the carrying in that young man's family was done by the ladies themselves. So when he put her down he grunted and gave her a shove to reassert his manhood and impress her with the proper regard for their relative positions in the eyes of society.

Jennie had her wits about her. Or, at least, she thought that she had. For the moment she was free from the clasp of those sinewy arms. According to the moving pictures, that was the time to run.

Jennie ran, darting into the fringe of bullberry bushes and red willows which grew along the river shore.

She turned and doubled, never looking back, believing those big brown hands were coming after her, reaching out to grab her without a sound.

Buffalo and his young men stood looking at the agitated brush which marked her trail like the wake of a boat. Big Buffalo said nothing; the young men grinned. Perhaps she was doing the thing they most desired her to do.

Anyway, they marched off down the river to a point below the ford where their horses were tied, mounted them, and galloped away toward the hills, Big Buffalo holding the camera with great care above the tops of the tall greasewood which swished around him as he rode.

And all the time poor little Jennie was running as hard as she could in the opposite direction. The dirty old handkerchief was still in her mouth where the brown hands had bound it, and the running was very tiresome where there were so many things with stickers and hooks on them to catch a young lady's skirt.

It couldn't last always. Jennie brought up on a little knoll, heaped by the sleepless desert winds around a daring clump of something that had ventured out into the open and tried to

grow alone. The tops of it, whatever it was, showed above the piled sand. There Jennie stopped, sunk to the ankles in the loose earth, looking back.

Not that she could make out which way she had come. All behind her looked exactly the same. But there was no wild Indian in the clothes of civilization there; no brown hand reached out to grip her and hold her fast.

She undid the handkerchief and threw it from her with a shudder of disgust. It smelled like tobacco, cologne, dog, horse, and something which Jennie could not define, but which she thought must be just plain Indian.

With the free breath which came after the mouth-stopper was out, Jennie's spirits rose. There was no sound of pursuit. So she would circle back cautiously toward the river, wade it in some shallow, and make her way to the tents of Comanche.

Rather enjoying the thrill, the creepiness of the adventure, now that the brown hands were not touching her, Jennie began her stealthy scout for the river.

She traveled in a crouching position, like the girl who slips ahead of the revenuers to warn her lover at his mountain still, dodging from clump to clump of brush until she regained the tall greasewood. Then she looked around for the river.

She couldn't make it out, but it must be there somewhere. On she pushed, parting the brush with a swimming motion. Real Indians—live ones! Captured by them for a little while, too—actually captured and carried across the river! What a thriller for the girls back home!

And there she was, alive and free to tell it, and a growing feeling of satisfaction in her little heart over it all. It took more than a pack of ignorant, savage, wild Indians to outwit a graduate of old Molly Bawn. Jennie could tell you that.

She must have run a terrible distance from that river. That was what Jennie began to think about it when she mounted another little hill to take her bearings.

The sun had dropped behind the far-away mountains and the chill of night was settling over the gray land. Jennie looked about her for some sign of the cottonwoods that could be seen along the river from Comanche. They were not there. Her heart began to pound dreadfully, a trembling feeling came into her thirsty throat.

The river was not there; the river was *lost!*

Jennie began to run frantically in search of it. It must be found and forded before dark; it must—it must!

Night overtook Jennie a little before she reached the foot of a level-topped butte which stood out of the plain like the ruins of a flat. Beside a big boulder at its base she sat down to rest and think. It was a serious situation for Jennie; it would have been a serious situation for anybody strange to that inhospitable land.

Tired, bruised, frightened, she threw herself down upon the warm sand. All that trouble had come from being forward and rude and smart with that little old camera, and it all could have been avoided by sending the roll of films to Big Buffalo and asking One Horse to explain.

But there is one thing stronger than thirst, hunger, sorrow, fright, regret, or love; that one thing is sleep. Men have been known to sleep the night before they were married or hanged.

There on the warm Wyoming sand, the whispering desert wind blowing coldly down from the mountains over her, Jennie slept. Miles away, in the tent city of Comanche, her mother wailed and waited, while horsemen booted, saddled, mounted, and rode away in search of her.

III.

LATE that night the searchers found Jennie's tracks going down into the river. All indications led to the belief that she had slipped in the insecure

gravel and had been unable to regain the shore. For that was a swift stream.

A wagon crossing that ford would slue around like a ferry-boat in an outrunning tide. So they searched the stream below, finding nothing of her, of course.

It was not until next morning that Mrs. Tree recalled the incident of taking Buffalo's picture and the visit of One Horse in that connection. This information threw light on the mystery.

"She hadn't orto 'a' done it," said the sheriff, shaking his solemn, thin-edged head. "Them old fellers, they don't like it."

After expressing himself so, the sheriff rode away to examine the other side of the river. There he found the trail of Big Buffalo and his two assistants.

A great whoop and hurrah was raised over the plain evidence that Indians had carried off the young lady from her peaceful pursuits—something that had not happened in Wyoming in twenty-five years.

The Indian police were called out, the deputies were called out, the posse comitatus was called out. Everybody was called out, for the town was shaken with indignation. Word was sent to the military post, asking that a detachment of cavalry be sent to take up the pursuit.

Big Buffalo had expected all that, for he believed the black box to be big medicine of some kind and a treasure which the white men would go far to recover. But pursuit didn't bother him any.

Getting away had been his main business for the seventy-odd years that he had ranged those mountains and plains. He was not the man to be caught by a bunch of educated Indians and uneducated whites—at least, not on the first frisky dash from the tents of civilization.

They rode and they rode on Big Buffalo's trail, and when they could ride no farther they went afoot over the ragged hills and through the shadowy cañons. Buffalo and the black medicine-box which contained the shadow of his soul were always somewhere in the lead.

The posse comitatus, its indignation somewhat frayed by two nights and a day afield, trickled back to town. The sheriff came along presently, leaving the job to the Indian police, to whom, he said, seeing that the chase had led out of his jurisdiction, it rightly belonged.

And about that time came the young man, One Horse, with the dust of hard riding on his uncovered head. One Horse was also an Arapahoe, and the bond of liegeman bound him to the service of Chief Big Buffalo. No matter what he was in public among the tents of civilization, in private One Horse was an Indian, from his feather to his heels.

One Horse came to the tent of the Jennie party after dark. He asked for supper with an air of importance and shielded himself behind the tent-flap with a bearing of secrecy.

After he had eaten everything in sight he wiped his mouth on a paper napkin, to show that he was as much of a gentleman as the best of them, and remarked:

"Nice weather we're having."

Jennie's mother could restrain herself no longer, no matter what the requirements of Indian etiquette might be.

"Where's that nasty old chief?" she began.

One Horse rose with great dignity and started to leave.

Jennie's mother appealed to him tearfully, and the sergeant squared off in front of him to bar the way.

"This is the word Chief Big Buffalo told me to say to you," said One Horse, all the flippancy of his educated ways gone out of him, "and I'm here to tell you. But don't you let them fellers git onto me—see? Chief Big Buffalo says if you'll send him five of them

little chunks of cheese wrapped up in t'backer wrappin' like he got here, it'll be all right. That's what Chief Big Buffalo he says. I'll be here to-morrow night to git 'em—see?"

One Horse walked out sternly, determinedly. He moved just as if he would have walked right through the sergeant if he hadn't moved out of the way. It was the shortest speech One Horse ever had been known to make since he acquired facility in two languages.

Mrs. Tree looked at the sergeant; the sergeant looked at the ridge pole, a deep expression in the wrinkles of his eyes. She believed that Jennie was captive in the tents of Chief Big Buffalo, and that limburger was to be her ransom. The sergeant believed likewise, and she was not free to resent it when she saw a gleam of triumph on his face.

Mrs. Tree appealed to him as a mother, and the sergeant answered like a man. He fastened his brown derby firmly upon his head. When he put it on that way it worked with his scalp muscles as he chewed his tobacco, undulating a little, like the hat of a man seen above the tops of corn. Together they hurried out in search of five bricks of limburger cheese.

They found that limburger is a delicacy of civilization. It does not go with the flag, like bottled beer and headache-powders, but comes a long way after it, with paved streets and ice-cream cones. There was no limburger in Comanche.

But the sergeant remembered a saloonkeeper in Cheyenne who had been his friend when the soldier was stationed at Fort Russell. And to him the sergeant sent a telegram, requesting immediate shipment by express of five bricks of limburger. "The older the better," added the sergeant, the concluding line coming to him like an inspiration.

Next morning there came an answer from the man in Cheyenne.

"Shipped goods this morning," it said; so there was nothing to do but wait. The package should arrive on the afternoon train, and there was the hazard of wreck and delay.

It was a nervous day in camp, but in the course of the afternoon the limburger came, as limburger will come to any man who telegraphs for it, if his credit is good. The man who has it in hand always appears anxious to pass it along to somebody else.

One Horse arrived silently after dark, reached out silently, and took the package. He didn't open his mouth to let out a single word, but racked off toward the hills with all speed, the cheese in a gunny-sack across his shoulder. It was plain that he had a horse tied out in the brush somewhere.

About that hour a goggle-eyed sheep-herder pulled himself up out of the sand behind a tent saloon and began to feel where his money used to be. It wasn't there; but he didn't expect it would be, so that didn't worry him at all.

But there was something else that had been entrusted to him for delivery, and that he had safe enough in his inside pocket when he arrived the night before.

Now it was gone along with the money. The sheep-herder was troubled about that. Anyway, he'd make an effort to find the lady it was intended for and tell her that he had it once, but that it had escaped.

He slouched around toward the tent where Mrs. Tree and the men were looking off in the general direction One Horse had taken a few minutes after the disappearance of that remarkable young man.

On the way he met one of his own kind, a new arrival, with a little bale of money stitched in the inside pocket of his greasy coat. It is remarkable what precautions a sheep-herder will take to preserve and protect his money where there is nobody to take it from him. But the minute he reaches the place of bright lights he rips out the stitches and carries the hunk of bills

around in his hand. He wants to be ready to take up opportunities before they can gallop past.

There were many opportunities for an enterprising sheep-herder in Comanche that night, and two, of course, can see more chances than one. Whatever it was that the first comer had on his mind in connection with the lady in the tent, he forgot it in his eagerness to serve his friend.

IV.

One Horse made it around a little after breakfast. Wherever that shrewd old Big Buffalo was hiding himself, it could not have been far. One Horse grinned as he handed Jennie's little camera to Mrs. Tree. She backed away a little, her arms lifted imploringly.

"My daughter," she demanded — "where is my child?"

One Horse regarded her with unmoved expression. He put the camera down on a box and felt of his back hair to see if his feather was following in the accustomed place. The men of the party leaned forward in threatening attitude, and One Horse looked at them with his civilized smile.

"My child," repeated Mrs. Tree, grasping the young man by the arm, shaking him as if to free his tongue— "where is my child?"

"Lady, you can search *me*," said One Horse mildly.

"What a' you givin' us?" demanded the sergeant sternly. "Didn't you come here and say the old man'd give her up if we'd send him all of that there cheese—say?"

"My daughter, my poor little girl!" groaned Mrs. Tree, leaning on the engineer, who fanned her with his hat.

"That box," said One Horse briefly.

"But where's the girl?" asked the sergeant. "I'm here to tell you, my friend, you'll either pre-duce that there girl or you'll hand back that cheese! Do you git me?"

"Old man he ain't got no girl," declared One Horse. "What you givin' me? Old man he's got two wives; don't want no more."

"Oh, my poor, poor child!" said Mrs. Tree, sinking back a little heavier on the engineer's shoulder. He looked at the others appealingly, fanning like he was starting a fire.

Around the corner of the little land office there came a wagon, flinging the white dust from its tires like a Missouri River stern-wheeler drips its cataract of drops.

On the front seat was a long-backed young man in a wide hat, and on the other seat was a little old lady who looked like she'd been fried. By the side of her was Jennie, as fresh as a new potato, waving her hand in sparkling innocence.

Kisses, tears, embraces, and all that. Then introductions. It was Mr. Ray and his delightful mother.

"The river got lost some way," explained Jennie, wrinkling her little forehead, still unable to figure it out. "I ran, and I ran, and I ran. Then I went to sleep. When I woke up I ran again, and I came to Mrs. Ray's place; they've got the loveliest sheep-ranch, you know. He's a college man"—she whispered to her mother— "isn't he just gr-and?"

On the floor of the tent was the paper which had bound the package of limburger. Jennie sniffed the scent when she entered. "Huh, limburger!" said she.

"I wouldn't knock—" began the sergeant.

"Sh-h-h!" warned her mother, lifting a silencing finger.

"Never again," declared Jennie. "Say, did you ever smell three thousand sheep?"

Miss Jennie having been restored to the arms of her mother, who had been so shaken by her loss that she hadn't looked into a glass but four times in three days, it would seem that the incident would of itself close and be dismissed from the public mind.

But no. Time had gone by for tele-

grams to pass between the military post and Washington; procedure had been honored in the ancient fashion, and a detachment of cavalry was at that eventful hour trotting into town to take up the old chief's trail.

No matter that Big Buffalo hadn't stolen the young lady, after all. He had taken the camera, and the dignity of the United States must be upheld. An example must be made of Buffalo before his people.

One Horse, seeing that his connection with the adventure must come out sooner or later, stepped forward and offered himself to the lieutenant in charge of the expedition as guide. He believed that he could lead them to Buffalo's hiding-place. For a small consideration he was willing to try.

It was to Big Buffalo's summer camp that One Horse led the troopers. As they approached a great wailing and yowling greeted them. It came from the wives of the once-eminent Big Buffalo, who were sitting on the ground in front of his tent, dejection in their bearing, sorrow in their tones.

"Somebody dead," said One Horse.

"If not dead, mighty bad off," admitted the lieutenant.

"Already dead and gone to heaven," declared One Horse, with a finality that admitted no dispute.

Investigation proved that One Horse had not forgotten the signs. Big Buffalo was no more among the living great. The old gentleman, weary from his marches and vigils, had consumed the whole of the ransom of Jennie's camera at a single meal.

Five pounds of limburger is too great a quantity for any well-bred man to eat at once. Few educated stomachs could handle it. In the case of Big Buffalo his years and his training were against him.

Sudden limburger in large quantities is like sudden joy or sudden sorrow. Sometimes it kills. That's what had happened to Big Buffalo, once mighty and respected chief.

The lieutenant made an excuse of stopping in to give them the news so that he might get another peep at Jennie.

"Well," said the sergeant, full of wonder, making a noise with his mouth such as some people make when they eat oranges—"well, I tell you, gentlemen, he could 'a' died a worse death than that!"

GOD'S WAY.

"Oh, for a draft from the spring
At the old village gate!" sighed the king.
And the three stole down through the foe,
Filled a helm at the well—"blow for blow,
O my king, blood for blood then we gave,
Till we broke them, as ship's prow the wave!
So drink; it is hearts' love we bring,
O my king!"

"Say rather, a blood-offering,
My children!" The weary-eyed king
Took the helm. "No gift worthy of me,
But only of God. Let it be
To His honor, my warriors—so!"
But a heat-withered thistle below
Caught the life-giving water. God's way?
Who shall say?

H. Bedford-Jones.

In the Flagship's Stoke Hold

by John Moran

THE United States ship Mohawk, with seven ships composing the Pacific fleet, steamed restlessly back and forth, beyond the view of the enemy's stronghold.

It was the admiral's intention to run the two forts under cover of darkness, and he was impatiently pacing the quarter-deck while quartermasters and messengers made half-hourly reports of the state of the barometer. With each new indication of a cloudy, moonless night he smiled.

Suddenly a small string of varicolored bunting shot up to the yardarm. It was answered immediately by similar signals from the other ships forming the squadron, and by various comments from the men about the decks of the Mohawk, when the import of the message was known.

"The old man is going in," they cried in eager exultation, a little too eager in some cases, for no man is so brave or courageous but that he may in like circumstances experience a slight fluttering of the heart.

The football player, alert, impatient, trembling on his haunches awaiting the first kick-off, knows this. He experiences the same feelings as a man going into action.

The older men did less cheering. Some of them had seen action before. They knew the awful enormity of the tragedy about to be enacted; they were less enthusiastic about it. Many of these sat down with their ditty boxes in front of them to write their letters, realizing that these might be their last letters home, that the mails might go down with the ship, or that both these possibilities might become realities.

But the captain of the Mohawk appreciated the demoralizing effects of the tense inactivity. Barely had the ships straightened out on their new course before the general-alarm gongs clanged noisily in all parts of the ship.

Tense calmness changed instantly into apparent confusion as men swarmed the decks to their battle stations. Gun ports were lowered, the guns manned and divested of every trace of ornamental embellishments, ammunition brought on deck, magazines and shell-rooms opened.

The engineer's force scrambled to their stations in the hold below; the officers aloft to the bridge and military masts.

Shrill warning whistles gave evidence that sliding-doors were dividing the different sections of the ship into

watertight compartments which allowed neither ingress nor egress, but which also provided that any two or three could be shot-riddled without sinking the ship.

Then all was quiet on deck. Every one whose station allowed him the privilege strained his eyes to catch the first glimpse of the enemy's forts through the fast-falling darkness.

The engineer's force, "the black gang," absolutely isolated from the others, was still engaged, by the light of dim lanterns, in preparing for the battle.

Stoppers were put on steam-valves, bolts and nuts were tightened, safety-valves overhauled and adjusted, the suction apparatus for the various compartments examined.

But even here the bustle was of short duration. In fifteen minutes the men, leaning on shovels, sitting on overturned coal-buckets, or lounging against the bulkheads, began to feel the intense strain of inactivity.

They longed for something to do. It was no use to talk, for such conversation consisted solely of one unanswered question—"How far off are we?"—unanswered because no one could know.

The only communications with the upper decks, a telephone and a voice-tube, were for the sole use of the captain or the admiral.

In the engine-room oilers had their machines in a white lather of lubricant; machinists had every nut tightened to the breaking point; the machinists' mates were calculating what the engine-room revolution-dials would read one minute—five minutes—ten minutes hence; what it would read when the first shot was fired; how much time must elapse at the present speed before each figure would be a "9."

The officer of the watch and his junior, a midshipman, were leaning over the log-desk reading some order. After a brief dialogue the midshipman, paper in hand, called several names, and stationed men at flood-cocks, drain and discharge valves, and at the pumps.

This done, all waited once more. The officer of the watch, cigar in mouth, paced restlessly up and down the alleyway. The men pottered about as before.

In the fire-rooms the furnaces were choked to capacity limit with coal. Hairy, naked men filled their shovels, dropped them, picked them up and filled them again and again, waiting impatiently for an opportunity to feed the furnaces until the captain on the bridge complained of the excessive smoke.

One man said that this wait was nothing to one he had had in the woodshed for three hours for his "old man to come and whale him." The analogy was not at all perfect, however.

These men suffered mainly from an unsatiated, maddening curiosity, a desire to know what was going on about them. "How soon will we strike? How will we know whether we are winning or not?" were samples of the tormenting questions they asked themselves.

They were not afraid. None of them realized that, in case the ship went down fighting gamely to the last, they would go with it like rats in a trap. They did not care. One man in No. 2 fire-room did remark, with a childlike petulance, that he would give ten years of his life if he could be at that moment manning a gun on the decks above, but the words were scarcely out of his mouth before "Scrapper" Maddox, a short, stocky water-tender, hit him with a monkey-wrench.

"We will have none of that in this joint," he said. But the effect was good. It set the men thinking of their grievances. Here they were, absolutely indispensable to the success of the ship, yet forgotten entirely by the men at the fighting machines above.

They were stuck in their black tun-

nels to do their duty, which, once accomplished, would finish their period of usefulness.

The newspaper reporters would afterward interview the separate gun's crews, but they would not be objects of admiration to an adoring public. All glory would go to the men on deck who had delivered the shots.

Other fire-room crews were not so well off. No. 3 especially was indisposed for a wait of this sort. All attempts at conversation had ceased here. Nerves were strained to the breaking-point. Men gazed into each other's seamed, seared faces.

A gage-glass popped and broke. It was a small detail, yet each man jumped, startled into activity. Jones, a hulking, big coal-passer, cried, with an agonized voice: "My God! Oh, my God! Take me away! Let me out!"

He covered his face with his hands and burst into long-drawn, piteous sobs, then hammered despairingly upon the water-tight bulkhead.

All eyes turned upon him with contempt. For the second time that afternoon a water-tender wielded his hammer, and Jones's unconscious form was roughly taken up and thrown behind a boiler, away from the sight of his maddened fellows.

Then a shock threw every one from his feet. A roar followed—the battle was on. A call for more steam came from the engine-room. Each man hastened to his station. Enthusiasm ran riot.

Rich, red, hot blood, with the Irish predominant, pumped through every man's veins, shone in his begrimed face. This was living.

Each man talked to himself, lending what telepathic aid he could to the straggling men on the gun-deck.

"Slip it to 'em, boys. Uncle Sammy's got the goods. We'll show them we ain't the ones to lay down—eh, lads!"

They called their favorite gun-pointers by their nicknames, sang, danced jigs when the roaring furnaces allowed them a moment's respite.

They hugged each other in ecstasy. No longer was theirs the fever of impatience to be on deck.

"We'll drive this old wagon so hard and fast they can't sink her." And they fell to to do their share.

The water-tender in No. 3 gazed with fascination at the steam-gage. Steadily upward it crawled until the safety-valve popped, when he sent two men on top of the boiler to tie it down.

It became hot, blistering hot, but none cared. Good, cool, fresh air would come later. At present there was work to be done, and each man was riotously glad that he was able to take part in it.

Few thought of Jones behind the boiler. Those who did forgot him instantly, or tried to—"Think of a man showing the white feather on a spree like this."

"The white-livered whelp; big fellow, too."

"We will have to send him ashore when we get through." And that was all.

But it was different with Jones. He recovered consciousness shortly after the first shot was fired. Rising weakly on one elbow he gazed about, then sank back again into his huddled quarters. Gradually the location of his whereabouts became known to him. "How came he there?"

Another shock and a roar helped him out of his quandary. The battle was on! "Had he been hurt?" A hasty inspection revealed the lump on his forehead. "Yes, he had. But, thank God, he was not too late to get back in the game!"

He arose to his feet, stepped weakly from behind the boiler, and advanced, pale-faced, into the glare of the fire-room. "How's things, Mac?" He addressed the water-tender.

"Get out of here!" was his answer, with another smashing blow from the powerful "Mac," with the bare fist this time. It caught him flush be-

tween the eyes. He struggled feebly to his feet, only to be stricken again, this time to stay.

"Here, three or four of you men," growled the water-tender, "I can't hit this lump again. Take it away."

With a last pitying glance at the unfortunate fellow he returned to his vigil at the gage-glass, while Jones was thrown once more behind the boiler.

Now the tide of battle changed. More was heard than the dull reverberations of discharge. Occasionally a shot struck the ship. The men below were well aware of it. The sensation was new to all. One man was knocked silly with his impact against the steel bulkhead. Each braced himself for the intermittent shocks of impact, but went on with his work.

Hurried orders came from deck. The ship settled forward. Pumps were hastily connected to flooded compartments. Then the ship listed to port until instructions from the engine-room caused those compartments to be pumped out.

One shell exploded directly overhead. It left a ragged hole, but no shrieks followed the explosion. The enemy had the range.

A frantic demand for more steam caused another sortie with the shovels, and the men cheered lustily when the new communication with the upper deck convinced them that their own fire had slackened not a bit.

But another shot and another wrought havoc. The telephones and telegraphs clattered unceasingly. The ship was in distress. One by one the batteries ceased.

The starboard engine-room was wrecked, shells forced their way into the fire-rooms, carrying with them an awful toll of death and suffering.

No. 3 had so far escaped, but a wreck there was momentarily expected.

The Mohawk's fire suddenly ceased entirely. Both turrets were demolished within a ten-second interval. The safety of the ship depended upon her getting past the enemy's batteries before her motive-power was destroyed.

The "black gang" struggled relentlessly. Three fire-rooms were entirely out of commission, more were going. Two more were useless because of jagged steam lines; another, because of her crippled force, was barely making steam enough to warrant coupling her up with the others.

The captain called for steam. No. 3 alone responded—responded nobly until the first shot dropped in from overhead and reduced her force by half, but the steam lines remained intact.

Men left their stations to take up shovels, the ash-pit doors were closed. Again the needle crawled up. A word of praise and encouragement reached them from the bridge.

"Five minutes more. We are running aground inside, out of range."

The din and confusion became indescribable. It was too late to send the wounded men aloft. All, dead and dying, were placed together out of the way, and the battle with the furnaces went on.

Then fire broke out overhead.

"More steam! More steam! Put some force on the fire main! The deck pumps!"

Again the ceaseless, unsatisfied call. Volunteers from the deck force dropped through the shell-holes to reinforce the sweltering furnace crew.

The work went on. There was no time for any display of fear when half a ton of steel exploded dangerously near. None knew of it, nor would they have cared, provided only that the steam connections remained fast.

More encouragement from the bridge! The ships following the Mohawk had done their work. The enemy's fire was abating, for they, firing mainly at the leading ship of the incoming squadron and to the almost complete destruction of that ship, had been at the mercy of those that followed.

The enemy's only hope, in fact, lay in sinking the great Mohawk in the narrow channel. By that means alone could she block the channel to the passage of the ships following, and a few more shots would be sufficient to complete her design.

The Mohawk blazed from stem to stern. She was down by the head with a dangerous list to port. The decks, indescribably torn up and littered with wreckage, and grotesquely disposed bodies, swarmed with active, nimble-footed men who fought fiercely to subdue the flames, or in any event to keep them away from the endangered magazines.

Below decks the powder division, with the carpenter's gang, strove to stem the incoming torrents of water by manning the hand-pumps and applying rude stoppers to the holes. The decks reeked with the carnage of the wreckage, the dead and the dying.

But down in the black holds of fire-room No. 3 the real fight went on. They were winning, had nearly won, but at what a loss. These men cared not. They cheered, sang, howled with glee at each new indication from the bridge, and shoveled—shoveled as they never had before.

Finally the good word came from above. It was the admiral himself.

"We are sheering out of column to make way for the others. Thirty seconds and the day is ours. You are to be congratulated."

A mighty cheer arose from the heaving, desperate men—a cheer of short duration, a cheer that was blotted out by a deafening report! All thought that another shell had burst in the fire-room until a hot, scalding, shimmering sheet of steam whistled and leaped from the steam-pipe, filling the place with a dense cloud of steam which must surely burn them all to death.

The steam-pipe had sprung a leak. The pointer dropped, the men ducked for cover, stolidly awaiting the horrible end which must be theirs.

Then the air cleared, the men sprang again to action. Gradually the pointer ran up to normal pressure, the engines stopped, the ship shuddered from stem to stern, racked horribly and threw every man on his face. They were aground out of range. The day was won.

All pumps were put on the fire main, the decks showed ruined and blackened, but the ship was intact. All rushed to the sides to cheer the seven other ships as they, still spitting tons of lead at the now demolished forts, steamed past the Mohawk.

The men on deck now became strangely quiet. Then, and then only, did they realize the cost of their success.

Messmates and comrades lay dead at their feet. The sadness of it all was unbearable. Strong, powder-stained men cried like babies. They hunted among the dead and dying on decks and in the surgeons' dressing stations to cuddle and croon over their comrades with hysterical, motherly love and affection.

Fire-room No. 3 presented a different aspect. The dead and dying were not disturbed. The crew which had brought the ship safely through huddled together, gazing along Mac's pointed finger to the main steam-pipe where "Bear" Jones lay wedged between it and the neighboring bulkhead.

The water-tender spoke first: "And I hit that fellow; called *him* a skunk! Oh, my God!"

Jones had crawled along the top of the pipe and thrown himself feet first between the pipe and the bulkhead, where his own weight, with the escaping steam-pressure, wedged him tighter and tighter between the pipe and the bulkhead, and against the gap from which the scalding steam had escaped.

His body was burned through from his waistline to his neck, showing how he had used his body for an automatic stopper.

The Presidente's Reward

by Frederick Simpich

IT was a big strain on the *presidente* of Pagsanjan to read English—and he scowled and puckered his mouth over the unfamiliar words. But he persisted, slowly gleaning from the printed police circular before him that five thousand pesos would be paid for the body of the famous *ladrone,* Pedro Salazar, dead or alive, delivered at Manila.

"*Cinco mil pesos,*" he murmured slowly, repeatedly, so absorbed in the thought that the little pock-marked native policeman had to rap three times to arouse him.

"*Pase,*" growled the *presidente,* at last, and the little policeman shuffled in, his naked feet making a mopping sound on the bare wood floor of the old Spanish house.

"*Señor presidente,*" he murmured, "the *banqueros* took a dead man from the river this morning; my *señor jefe* presents his compliments and requests that you do him the favor to come and view the body. I am sent to conduct you to the place where the dead man lies."

So the *presidente* of Pagsanjan put on his *balawag* hat, took his big Malacca stick, and went forth, in white duck and plush-covered sandals, to investigate the morning mystery; for in the tiny *barrios* of Luzon a *presidente* is mayor, police-judge, and coroner combined, and as a side-line operates the cock-pits and the little *tienda* where beno, cigarettes and other articles are sold.

Across the rubbish-strewn plaza the barefoot policeman led the way, and thence down a narrow street flanked by rows of *nipa* shacks. Loitering *hombres* and troops of curious, silent children fell in behind the pair, trailing after them to the sandy river bank at the end of the short street.

Rafts of coconuts—lashed together with jungle vines—were anchored off shore, and a herd of ponderous, clumsy water-buffalo bathed lazily in the cool water, wholly submerged but for their black, evil faces and wide, sweeping horns.

The beach reeked of decaying fish and sewage from the town. A score of *bancas,* dragged from the river, rested on rollers made of palm logs. One of these boats had been half turned over, and beneath it—in the scant shade—lay the body the *presidente* had come to see.

A mixed crowd of idlers squatted about, staring curiously at the body of the dead man. As the *presidente* came up they arose and fell back respectfully.

The *jefe* of barefoot police was already there, obsequiously busy—fussing around the dead man. He saluted as the *presidente* arrived, and pointed to the body as if he were in that moment discovering it for the first time.

Then the *jefe* beckoned authoritatively to the two banqueros who had taken it from the river, and they came up, and plunged into their story—garrulously—importantly.

When they saw it first, they said, it must have been floating in an upright position—like a man walking—for only its head was visible, which made them think it only a coconut loose from one of the rafts.

But when they looked again, feet stuck up where the head had been, and then they knew it was a body and that it had turned over. They had seen bodies float that way before—in the cholera year—when the river was choked with them.

But they knew the law and always obeyed it, so as soon as they saw it was a body and not a coconut, they hooked it and brought it ashore and notified the *jefe*.

And now, would the *señor presidente* please pay them for the time they had lost? They could have ferried three loads of *zacate* from the fields above the *barrio* in the time they'd lost catching the body and towing it in! Would the *presidente*—who was rich—please pay?

But the *presidente* heard no word of all this.

Leaning over the dripping body, he studied the dead man's face—studied it long and critically for it was oddly like the face of a man he knew—but knew to be alive!

Now the government that paid this *presidente* trusted him—but at heart he was a rogue, crooked as a dog's hind leg. Pedro Salazar—the outlaw named in the circular—the outlaw for whose body, dead or alive, the Americanos would pay five thousand pesos, was his bosom friend.

Time and again he had sheltered Salazar, when his pursuers pressed him hard, and time and again Salazar had shared with the trusted *presidente* the loot from his raids.

Hence it was that the face of the dead man puzzled the *presidente*—for it was the face of Salazar! A singular, striking likeness.

Still the *presidente* stooped and peered—and in his cunning Oriental mind there flashed a new-born plan, which grew and developed and gripped him as he looked at the face so like Salazar's. "If it could be done—if it *only* could!" he breathed—"*cinco mil pesos!*"

Suddenly he straightened up decisively.

"Take the body to my house, put it in the shade, and guard it!" he curtly ordered.

"*Si, señor,*" answered the *jefe*, saluting again.

A few small coins quieted the clamorous *banqueros*, and the *presidente* turned abruptly, quit the group, and walked briskly back to his house, which stood at the edge of the *barrio*, in the margin of a vast banana field.

It was once the spacious home of a Spaniard—a coconut buyer who had fled the islands in 1898. Its lower story was of stone and *dhobie*, thick-walled, damp, and cool. Here the horses, the fowls, and the servants were kept, the family occupying the upper floor, a spacious structure with thatched roof and sliding windows where scraped shells took the place of glass.

Mounting the stairs, the *presidente* hurried into the big front room—from whence the policeman had called him—and took from his littered table the printed circular. For the second time he scowled and puckered his mouth

over the English words—but there could be no mistake—he had read it correctly:

5000 PESOS REWARD

By order of the Governor-General Five Thousand Pesos Reward will be paid for the body of the outlaw, PEDRO SALAZAR, delivered in Manila, dead or alive.

F. H. Ransom,
Chief of Police.

"They want him badly," mused the *presidente* to himself, folding the paper and slipping it inside his *camisa*, "and, by the Virgin of Antipolo, I swear it, they shall have him!"

And he looked from his open window at the dead man from the river, being carried up the street, to his house. "We'll deliver a body, Pedro—*amigo mio*—and we'll split the reward and be rich—*muy rico!*"

And as he mused his little pig-eyes glittered and he sat down at his table and scrawled a line—a brief, imperative message. He had writing paper—reams of white stuff from the government printing plant at Manila, but he did not use that.

Instead he wrote his message on the blank side of a wrapper from a package of cigarettes. It might be easier to dispose of were his messenger suddenly surprised. He was shrewd—this slant-eyed *presidente*—and took no chances.

When he had scratched his line he put a few cigarettes back into the discarded package and called a *muchaco* by clapping his hands.

It was a short, stolid lad who answered his call—a dull lad who seldom spoke—nicknamed "Loco" in the village. But the *presidente* fed him, was kind to him, and between them they kept certain secrets unsuspected by the plodding towns folk.

And when the *presidente* had talked to the boy, briefly, sharply, in a low tone the boy sauntered out carelessly and lost himself in the thick banana patch behind the house.

Hours later the same short, stolid boy—on a fleet pony—toiled up steep hill paths, wound through hemp fields and glades of tangled cogon grass, and came finally to an empty straw hut on a mountainside.

Sitting his horse quietly, he whistled—then whistled again, softly, but clearly—like the hemp thrush; and presently a faint whistle answered him from the thick jungle above, and a little man in red pantaloons—wearing a ridiculously big bolo—came out, and waved his hand and climbed down the hillside to the boy on horseback.

The boy gave the little man the package of cigarettes, and without uttering a word he turned and scrambled back up the hill; the boy got off, tied the pony, and started back to Pagsanjan—afoot.

Down in the *barrio*, in the darkened *sala* of his house, the *presidente* put wet cloths on a dead man's face, poured cool water over a stiffening body, and fanned away buzzing things that swarmed, hungrily, eager to disfigure a face that looked like the face of Pedro Salazar, the outlaw.

And to those who complained that the body should be buried he answered that under a new law all unclaimed bodies should be delivered to Manila, and none disputed, for was it not known that all *Americanos*, particularly officials, were quite mad?

It was dusk when Pedro Salazar, fugitive, a price on his head, emerged cautiously from the hillside hemp fields, riding the short, stolid boy's fleet pony.

When he had neared the *barrio's* edge he dismounted and made his way afoot, slipping from tree to tree, silently, swiftly, till he gained the thick banana patch. Through it he passed hurriedly—for he had passed that way before and knew the path was safe. A moment more and he was with the *presidente*.

"What is it, *amigo*, that you should send for me, when the whole province swarms with wolfish men, eager for

my life? Is it that they suspect? Shall I fly — for your safety and mine?"

"*Mira,* Pedro!" chuckled the *presidente.* "Patience and fear not; we shall play a trick that will save you and make us rich. Hark to my plan!"

And he told the outlaw, briefly, hurriedly—told him of the dead man, of his strange resemblance to Salazar; told him how easy it would be to fool the mad *Americanos* and collect the fat reward, which should be divided between them—as they had always divided.

It would mean ease for both—the races, the cockpit, the *baillerinas* and joy unceasing, and for Salazar it would also mean safety from pursuit—freedom!

"But first show me this body that you say might pass for mine," breathed Salazar, and the *presidente* lit a candle, and held it over the dead man's face.

The outlaw stooped and looked and shrank quickly back—nervous and astonished. Then stealthily—unseen by his friend—he crossed himself and edged slowly away from the corpse.

"Is it not as your face?" whispered the *presidente* triumphantly.

"*Si.*"

"And my plan will work, you think?"

"*Seguro, si.*"

"Then quick. Let us act as I explained. It is a long ride to Manila, and the sun is hot. I wish there was ice."

Salazar gave the *presidente* his ring, some letters he had received, and a cheap watch with his initials on the case—all to be put on the dead man's body.

And Salazar had a gold tooth in front, where it showed plainly. So the *presidente* took gilded tinfoil from a Manila cigar, twisted up a bit like a crown, and pressed and molded it firmly over a corresponding tooth in the dead man's mouth, and then stood back and looked, first at the dead man and then at his friend. It was an artistic finishing touch—the resemblance was startling.

But during all this—though the busy *presidente* noted it not—Salazar kept his distance from the corpse, back from the candle light, near an open window, where a fresh breeze blew in from over the rustling banana plants.

Besides his wish to shun the dead man, he felt safer with his face in the dark and near an open window from which he might flee quickly should he have to. He recalled vividly that in this same house—only a week before—he had lain cramped and breathless for long, tense hours, while the *presidente* persuaded Captain Marsh, of the constabulary, that the outlaw Salazar had not been in that *barrio* for months—that he was hiding now at San Mateo, miles and miles away. He was a hunted man, was Pedro, and ever on the alert.

He was glad when the *presidente* said all was ready and called men to take the body. He hid himself hastily as the bearers stumbled in and lifted the body, still on the plank, and carried it off the waiting *banca.*

With a whispered word of parting the *presidente,* who had lagged behind, told him *adios* and followed out into the night. He could not trust others with the body.

It was agreed that Pedro should remain hidden until the moon had set—when the darkness would cover his retreat to his hiding-place in the hills up river.

The banca party embarked quickly. Stalwart *banqueros,* squatting low in their long, narrow craft, worked their short, spoonbill paddles easily, ripplingly, sending the banca speeding down stream under their powerful, skilful strokes.

At the river's mouth they changed to another craft, a larger, catamaran *banca,* with a sail and outriggers of bamboo. Before the freshening lake wind they made good time.

Hour after hour, as they splashed

on, the *presidente* sat close to the thing that lay stretched in the bottom of the leaky, rocking boat—guarding it jealously, as a man might guard his dead child. Now and then he slopped water on it and cursed the *patron* and the slow progress of the boat—which was not slow at all!

It was dawn when they passed from the lake into the yellow Pasig, sweeping past *barrios* where blue morning smoke arose and floated over green bamboo and spreading mango groves. Women and children, mingled with the *carabao* bathing in the river shallows, called roguishly after them to know the reason for their haste.

But they paddled on—nor stopped till their heavy boat bumped the stinking stone wharf at the foot of the Bridge of Spain, in the heart of busy, crowded Manila's water-front. And barely a mile in their wake—though they dreamt it not—came another big banca from Pagsanjan with soldiers in it.

"It's Salazar all right," the whole station agreed. "His description exactly—even to the gold tooth."

And to clinch it the chief called Captain Raney, P. C., from whose company Salazar had deserted. The captain came hurrying by *carromata* from headquarters at Fort Santiago, half a mile away.

"Sure it's Salazar!" he cried, excitedly, as he hurried into the station and looked quickly at the body. "I'd know the rascal anywhere."

Then the governor's secretary came and had a look and congratulated the *presidente*, as "a splendid example of the loyal native official." Yes, the reward should be paid at once.

"*Ting-a-ling-ling!*" went the chief's desk phone.

"Yes, police headquarters—what's that?" said the chief doubtfully. "What's that? You're mistaken, Captain Marsh; we've got him here now—dead. *Presidente* of Pagsanjan just arrived with his body and has claimed the governor's reward. Between you and this lizard of a *presidente* you've certainly got me going. But I'll hold up things here a minute. Rush your man over!—you're coming ahead in a carromata? Right-o!"

The chief hung up the receiver and beckoned to his desk sergeant, whispering a word to him as he leaned across the table. The sergeant nodded, stepped over to the *presidente* and took him by the arm.

"Just come with me a moment, will you, please, *señor?*" he asked politely, as he led the way to the door of the detention room. The Filipino got up, tottering a little, the chief thought, as if sick, and followed the sergeant into the adjoining room.

Almost immediately Marsh, of the constabulary, stamped in, panting, perspiring, and indignant.

"What kind of a double-cross are you fellows giving me, I want to know!" he blustered. "Here I've been trailing this cutthroat Salazar for weeks—and last night we got him. Had a tip and caught him hiding in the *presidente's* house at Pagsanjan—and got two men boloed by the murdering crook before we got the irons on him.

"We paddled all night, and just got in; but now you say you've got him already, that he's dead, and that the *presidente* of Pagsanjan beat me to it with the goods. What I want to know is—is this a joke? Is there two Pedro Salazars— Or if—"

"Look behind you, in the corner, Marsh," suggested the chief, still badly at sea himself.

Marsh looked, saw the body from Pagsanjan—looked closer, and then stood blinking foolishly, utterly speechless.

"I knew it was Salazar the minute I saw it," crowed Raney, gleeful at the discomfiture of Marsh, whom he disliked.

"Oh, you think so, do *you*, Mr. Highbrow from headquarters. Well, I'll just show you where you're wrong as usual!"

And mad through and through, but still badly puzzled himself, Marsh ran to the doorway and bawled an order.

There was a shuffling of feet, the clank of guns and equipment, and three native cavalrymen marched in, escorting Pedro Salazar, the famous *ladron!*

Marsh had an eye for the dramatic, and he said nothing, watching closely to see how they took it. But there was no need of argument — Salazar was known by sight to every man present, and he had served under Raney. He grinned when he saw his former captain, and saluted mockingly.

"Pedro," said the chief sternly, "who is that in the corner?"

The man's shifting, restless eyes had scanned the big room at one swift glance as he came in, and he knew then what was on the board.

But he feigned ignorance, crafty, feeling his way to the last, and swaggered over and looked down stoically, indifferently at the dead face—so like his own.

Then in one of the unexplainable, freakish impulses that distinguish so many criminals, he told the truth.

"He was my brother, *señor*—a hermit who lived near the falls, on the upper river. He died of plague night before last, and his neighbors threw him in the water."

Marsh edged away from where he had stood, close to the thing on the board.

"Call the *presidente!*" ordered the chief suddenly.

The desk sergeant hastened to obey, jerking open the door of the detention room. On the floor lay the *presidente*, his knees drawn up under his chin, his limbs oddly twisted, his brown face turned a grayish, mottled hue. One cramped hand clutched a printed police circular.

Backing hastily from the room the scared sergeant turned and faced his chief.

"He's got it, chief!" he cried hoarsely. "He's got it himself—the plague!"

BUBBLES.

Pipe in hand, my lady fair
Tosses bubbles in the air.
(Pleasant occupation).
Really now, 'tis rather strange
That a breath can make such change—
Yes, a transformation!
Just a breath in pipe of clay,
And they grow and sail away,
For your delectation;
And in each one you may trace—
See!—the image of your face.

So, my lady, when on me
Breathes your spirit tenderly,
Lo, a transformation!
All the dulness of my thought
Into filmy fancies wrought
By the inspiration,
Shimmers into rimes that rise,
Floating round you bubble-wise
For your delectation.
And behold! These bubbles, too;
Each reflects its mistress—you!

Charles F. Lester.

A Watch Charm Novel

by Emerson Griffith

HERBERT VANDEMOER found his proper sphere when he landed on a cattle ranch somewhere in New Mexico. His father's will had left him the property. The remainder of the Vandemoer estate, appraised at half a million, was to go to Vandy on condition that he wed Alice Fahnstock.

The estate was to be held in trust for two years, or until the nuptials were solemnized. If, at the end of that time, the conditions were not fulfilled the half million should be bestowed upon something or other.

Vandy was satisfied with these stipulations; but Alice, soon after the elder Vandemoer's death, became the bride of a man who was worth three-quarters of a million. Then Vandy sensibly went to take charge of his ranch. (With these few preliminaries the plot will now coagulate.)

A year after her conjugal vows Alice obtained a divorce and a handsome cash settlement. Alice was a bright girl, brainy and beautiful. Vandy heard about the separation. He wrote—they both wrote. He still wanted Alice and the half million more than ever. Alice always loved him, but only recently had discovered the fact—she said so herself.

However, for reasons of her own, she kept putting off considering the possibility of their marrying. The day when the stipulation in the will should be annulled drew near. Still no definite word from Alice.

Her seeming indifference made Vandy all the more anxious. Such is human nature. It would take him a week to travel East. One month remained—two weeks, ten days. How time dragged and flew at the same time!

Then, just when all seemed lost, Vandy received the prayed-for message saying he might hurry East to claim Alice's hand and his father's fortune.

The jubilant stock-grower rode his pinto on the run all the way to Rita MacGregor's, to tell her the gladsome news.

In the first place Rita was Mexican, and in the second, Scotch. This combination never strikes a happy medium. It either produces a Mexican poppy or a Scotch thistle.

Rita was convent bred, and the only person in all the countryside with the sympathy and understanding to receive Vandy's confidence, which had to find vent somewhere.

The adobe *casa* where Rita lived,

which was more pretentious than the other native houses, was in a garb that spoke eloquently of the harvest time.

On the flat roof were stacked sheaves of yellow corn. From the eaves hung glistening strings of bright red *chili.*

About the doorsteps the brown *frijoles* were drying on squares of white muslin. And from *la era,* down by the well, rose the shouts of two *rancho* hands who were driving a band of horses about the roped circle and thrashing out the wheat through the agency of the animals' hoofs. (Which, though the scene may shift, is all the local color that the length of this story will permit.)

When Vandy mounted the single step of the woodbine-shaded piazza he found Rita strumming a guitar and singing softly "*La Golondrina,*" an inquiry into the destination of a certain swallow.

"*Como estas, mi muchachita?*" asked Vandy, proud of his Mexican—not Spanish.

Rita, a wispish, black-eyed girl, arose and, with her head tilted a little to one side, looked up into Vandy's face.

"Don't give me any of that little girl stuff, you red-headed giant, or I'll tell Miss Fahnstock," she replied.

Vandy laughed and sat down. "She's consented," he announced. "I'm leaving to-morrow, and just in time. I came posthaste to let you share my joy."

"Hooray! and a couple of *vivas!*" cried Rita, waving her hand. "So it's all worked out just as I said it would—even when you were most hopeless."

"But, Rita," argued Vandy, "how could you foretell this without even ever seeing Alice? If you only realized what a wonderful, beautiful, adorable woman—"

"That's just it. In spite of all the adjectives she's a woman," said Rita. "Tell me all the latest developments," she continued, laughing.

He spent an hour on the MacGregor piazza before he rose to go, and during that time the brilliant Alice Fahnstock was the sole topic of conversation. (To chronicle their conversation, though it might be amusing, would be beating time as far as this argument goes.)

"Of course," said Rita, leaning against a porch pillar, "I'm tickled to death over this finale because I take the credit of engineering the thing through. But I'm sorry such a likable person must leave us."

"I honestly hate to go," said Vandy, his gaze sweeping appreciatively over the landscape. The sun had just set, leaving the mountains invested in a faintly orange, darkly purple sheen. "Perhaps, if my heart had not always been fixed upon it, I wouldn't be so eager. But just think of it, Rita: half a million pesos and the most beautiful girl in all the world!"

Rita walked with him down to the gate where his pinto was contentedly cropping gramma grass.

"If I were not such a good friend of yours," said Rita, pouting, "I should wish that you broke your leg or something to prevent your getting East in time to comply with that will."

"But, Rita, as you yourself said, you engineered this thing through," protested Vandy.

"Still, one hates to lose a friend," returned Rita. Then: "Tell me, Mr. Vandemoer, when you used to live back there, didn't all the fine ladies admire your red hair?"

Vandy doubled over his saddle-horn with laughter. "Yes," said he, when he could get his breath; "they used to surround me and beg for just one tiny little lock to tie with blue baby-ribbon." But finally he sobered and edged his horse up to the gate, upon which Rita was leaning.

"It's nearly dark, and I must get home and prepare to hike out early in the morning for the railroad," said Vandy, offering his hand. She let him clasp her slender fingers in his.

"You've helped make it mighty pleasant here for me," pursued Vandy; "and you're always going to be a pleasant memory. Good-by, Rita."

She did not speak, but just looked at him with her large eyes.

Then Vandy, still holding her hand, was seized by a strange impulse.

"*Mira*, look, Rita—look at my lucky star yonder!" said he, pointing.

As her eyes followed his finger he bent down suddenly and kissed her red, moist lips.

"*Adios, mi muchachita!*" he cried. And, putting spurs to his horse, he leaped away, with her startled breath still warm against his cheek.

Had he looked back he would have seen her leaning on the gate and gazing with apparently great interest at the ground. But he did not look back.

On his way home Vandy, in high spirits, paused before the door of Father Francisco, an old priest, to tell of his impending wedding and his departure on the morrow.

Father Francisco first expressed pleasure at Vandy's good fortune, then regret that he should be leaving the community.

The next day the scion of wealth set gaily forth upon a twenty-five-mile ride that took him out of the mountains and across an arid mesa to the county-seat, through which a railway ran.

It was just one o'clock when he shoved his suit-case beneath a Pullman seat and sat down with a sigh of satisfaction. The engine-bell rang; they started.

Then, for the first time, he turned toward the window and saw, rising grandly out of the desert mesa, the strip of verdant mountains in the heart of which was nestled his ranch.

Not once in hurrying down to the railway had he looked back. But now he could not draw his eyes away from their green, familiar outline. He had been happy there—far happier than he had realized, happier than he had ever been before.

With that sudden, stinging pang that tardy realization brings, he recalled, all in a second, a host of memories. He knew now that he had never been so at peace with the world as when, on those heaven-starred nights, he used to sit on his porch listening to a bull-frog symphony down in the cattle-pond.

He had found his proper sphere of usefulness; he had been a good citizen. What had his life amounted to before that time? Yet he was going back to it. But there was Alice; there was his father's fortune that had beckoned—these two things had always been reckoned essential to his happiness.

The train gradually was getting under headway. Faster and faster the wheels clicked against the rail-joints. Each click served to quicken Vandy's mental activity.

The thought came that the drawing-rooms of the big cities are overcrowded with the unhappy—though they know not why they are unhappy—offspring of the rich, whom nature had intended for less ornamental pursuits. He had been one of these misplaced creatures, a social misfit.

Clearly he was leaving behind a haven of content. But was that all? Was it possible that he had been letting his imagination deceive him still further? Had enhanced values, lent by the distant and the future, blinded him to his real feelings?

In response to repeated knockings at his door, Father Francisco was at last aroused from his evening meditations. He found two figures awaiting him at the door.

"I'm Vandermoer," said one of them, stepping into the light of the passageway.

"Man alive! how did you get your face so scratched up?" exclaimed the good priest in dismay.

"That's a long story," said Vandy, smiling and gently feeling a tender spot on his nose. "But for fear she might serve me right by changing her mind, I first want to see you give a demonstration of tying the nuptial knot with neatness and despatch. Here's the license. Come on in, Rita, *mi muchachita!*"

A Double Action Burglar

by Frank X. Finnegan

"DENVER JIMMIE," on a bench in the park, was cast down.

His countenance, at no time radiant with the joy of living, drooped and sagged under the dolor of his mind, and he glowered out at the waving trees and scolding sparrows with unaccustomed vigor.

Hoban, espying him from afar, paused to marvel at the glory of Jimmie's attire—the creased trousers, the tailored symmetry of his shoulders, the gleam of his fancy waistcoat in the sunshine — before drawing near. He looked like Denver Jimmie, this spruce, well-dressed specimen, frowning at a sunlit world, and still—

Hoban took a turn around in one of the winding walks of the park that brought him to a spot where he could get a close view of the familiar profile. It was his old companion without a doubt, and he walked briskly to greet him.

"Hello, Jimmie," he hailed, "where did you grab the front?"

Jimmie looked up, managed to smile a greeting, and lost it in a sigh as he glanced down at his clothing. He moved over and made way for Hoban on the bench.

"I gathered this in on my way," he said, "and I ain't so batty about it at that. Lookin' back at it now, I sort of wish I'd left this set of scenery hangin' where I saw it, Hobe. I never was strong for this fashion-plate stuff."

Hoban looked him over admiringly.

"Well, there's no use knockin' it," he commented; "you sure have the eye for the goods when you go collecting, Jimmie. That's as nifty a lookin' layout as I've seen on you in many moons. How does all this happen?"

"It was a kind of an accident, in a way, Hobe," said Jimmie, clasping his hands behind his head on the back of the bench and looking up into a tree; "I didn't go out lookin' for this suit of clothes knowin' where I could get it, or anything like that. I just happened on it while I was busy with somethin' else.

"You know Bill Keller — what a fiend he is for readin' the newspapers. The other afternoon him and me are restin' here in the park, and he's plowin' through the society news. I don't know whether Bill expects some day to see where one of his old girls got married to a duke or whether he's lookin' for one of them 'come-home-and-all-will-be-forgiven' gags in the agony column, but he's certainly there with the newspapers between meals.

"After a while he says to me: 'Say, Jimmie, are you good for a walk out to Holland Park this evening? Miss Muriel Peterby, only daughter of Colonel Asa Peterby, is to be married to-morrow noon to Mr. William Collins Archer, of San Francisco.'

"'I'm afraid I'll have to side-step you this evening, old top,' I says, because the colonel and me had a personal row over a card-game at the club last week and we're not on speakin' terms. Any other weddin' we're invited to,' I says, 'I'll be there with bells on.'

"'Well, I've got a particular and peculiar reason for pickin' this one out,' Keller says, 'and that is because I see here in the paper that Miss Muriel is goin' to be attended by a cousin of hers from Delaware, and another one from Vermont, and that one of Bill Archer's sisters is on from 'Frisco for the doin's.

"'Now, it's a cinch that all the girls are puttin' up at Colonel Peterby's for a few days,' he says, 'havin' a slant at Muriel's trossaw, and when there's that many females in one house preparin' for a weddin' there's sure to be a fair to middlin' amount of junk layin around on bureaus and one place and another. Do you get me?'

"'I get you, Bill,' I says; 'just show me the way to the colonel's.'

"When we got out there that evening along about dark it looked like an easy second-story job. The colonel had been gentleman enough to furnish up his suburban retreat with a big front and side porch, having four pillars on each side and a roof right under the bedroom windows. To save visitors from any extra climbin' he had also rigged up a vine-trellis affair, leaning against the side porch with cross-pieces that made a ladder out of it. The only thing it lacked was a sign sayin': 'This Way In.'

"Me bein' more deft of foot than Bill, and havin' in general a quicker eye for the valuation of loose property than he has, I elected myself to do the inside work, and Bill was to stall—that's the best thing he does, anyhow. We waited until we saw the merry party that was to pull off the weddin' the next day sittin' down to dinner, and then I went at the vine-covered trellis.

"I was up about two feet when I found out that Colonel Peterby keeps a dog on his place—not a blue-ribbon winner for looks, but great on speed. He suspected that I wasn't one of the regular weddin' guests and made a flyin' leap for me that carried away part of my riggin' as he went by—I didn't know just how much, but I could tell by the feelin' of the cool summer evenin' breeze that something important had happened while my back was turned.

"'Come in here and argue with this fool dog,' I says to Keller, who was just outside the hedge; 'you ought to know his language if you haven't outgrowed it, and I can't remember anything but his pedigree.'

"'I'll talk to him from here,' Bill says; 'come, Bruno,' he says, 'nice doggie.'

"Bruno was meanwhile tryin' to repeat by doin' high jumps that missed me about seven inches, and reportin' progress as he went along, so that it was a cinch the yard would be overflowin' with curious and interested parties in about a minute.

"I climbed up three more steps of the latticework that got me pretty near to the roof of the porch before I heard a side door open and some flunky come out on the porch.

"'I wonder what's the matter with Prince,' he says; 'he seems to be excited about something. Come, Prince,' he says, callin' the dog off; 'come in here.'

"I was crouchin' there among the grape-vines, expectin' he'd have sense enough to come out and take a look to see what was the matter with Prince, but hopin' he was too lazy. He was.

"'Maybe it's the big crowd in the

house that excited him,' somebody else says; 'come here, Prince. Come, boy,' and a lot of that stuff until Prince gave up the job and walked over to them. If they'd looked at his teeth close they might have seen the pattern of the suit I was wearin'; but they were too anxious to get back to the eatings, and they dragged Prince in and shut the door on him.

"'Now you see what was the matter,' Bill says from behind the hedge; 'I didn't know the blamed cur's name.'

"When everything got quiet again I went on up to the porch roof and in through one of the open windows into a bedroom. Hobe, I'm ashamed to tell you what a mess of junk was lyin' around in that place.

"It looked like an auction-shop on the morning of a big day. It was some girl's room—maybe the bride's for all I know—and she had shed rings and brooches and stick-pins all over the shack.

"I gathered 'em up and jabbed 'em into my pockets and went gently on my way to the next room and the next, amassing what was to be had, and, believe me, Hobe, it was some considerable. That weddin'-party was framin' to do things right in the way of the glitter and they seemed to be savin' it all for the next night."

Denver Jimmie paused to roll a cigarette, and his friend, Mr. Hoban, seized the opportunity to say a word.

"Well, I don't see where you're in very bad so far," he said; "things seem to be fallin' pretty soft for you—except gettin' the pants tore off you maybe."

"Lemme finish," Jimmie suggested; "I ain't got to the jumpin'-off place yet, Hobe, and you can't realize how I feel about it and why I'm sittin' here thinkin' what a chump I am. I got into about the fourth room and was idly slippin' a watch and a few things into my pocket when two girls come up the stairs, gabbin' their heads off. The room door was standin' open right at the head of the sta'rs, and there was nothing for me to do but duck into the clothes-closet.

"I'm hardly in there with the door shut, Hobe, when in comes those two dolls.

"'Oh, this is the colonel's room!' one of 'em says.

"'That's all right,' says the other one; 'he'll be down-stairs all evening. I just want to tell you this where nobody will interrupt us,' and then she cut loose and gabbled and chattered for half an hour and me smotherin' to death in the clothes-closet.

"I tried to get a line on what they were talkin' about to help me pass the time; but I was out of my depth in a minute—it was all about clothes—and that reminded me of my mix-up with Prince and the bum front I'd put up after I got out of there.

"'Here,' I says to myself, 'if this's Colonel Peterby's room this must be the old boy's clothes-closet. And if that's the case, I'm bein' heated to the meltin' point with some swell rags that I'll need very much by the time I get to the first lamp-post. Therefore, me for a suit of the colonel's clothes before leavin' his hospitable precincts.'

"I began pawin' around among the clothes, tryin' to locate something that would do, and had just got hold of this bunch of bags hangin' on one of them clothes-hangers, when the two girls got through with the big secret and beat it down-stairs again. I opened the closet door, took a flash at the clothes in the electric light, and decided they'd do for me.

"Not wantin' to rub it in on Colonel Peterby too hard, I left my old layout on the floor of the closet when I changed, dolled myself up in a new hat that was perchin' on the corner of a mirror, and got ready to slide for that latticework getaway. It was time, too, for the dinner-party down-stairs was breakin' up and I knew they might come swarmin' up on me any minute.

"After gettin' away from Prince and the butler, riskin' my neck climbin' and then dodgin' the two girls, I

wasn't takin' any chances on fallin' down at the wind-up by bumpin' into four or five husky guys all full of dinner and ready to fight. I weaved my way through the hall to the bedroom I came in through and got to the window. Bill, scoutin' up and down the road, gave me the office that everything was clear below and down I came.

"Say, you ought to seen him look at me when I came out through the side gate! The hat caught him first—for a minute he didn't think it was me. Then when we took a drill down the street and I passed under a lamp-post he took a good slant at the clothes.

"'Some class to the new scenery,' he says; 'I see now why you wanted to do the inside work.'

"'Not at all,' I says; 'but you didn't expect me to give a street parade after meetin' up with Prince until I'd grabbed a new bunch of bags, did you?'

"I could see Bill was kind of sore over me gettin' the swell suit so easy, but he didn't say anything until we'd walked on a block or so. Then he says: 'How was the plant?'

"'Fine and dandy,' I says; 'it looked to me like some o' them gals was simply scatterin' their spare junk around to see how much furniture they could cover with it. F'r instance,' I says, 'here's a necklace,' and I shoved my hand into my pocket. And then I pulled it out again, and then I stood still and looked at Bill a couple o' seconds and saw about six of him.

"Because it wasn't my pocket at all I'd put my hand into—it was Colonel Peterby's pocket—and my pocket was layin' on the floor of the colonel's clothes-closet with all that junk in 'em."

Denver Jimmie ceased with a heavy sigh, and his friend Mr. Hoban sighed in sympathy.

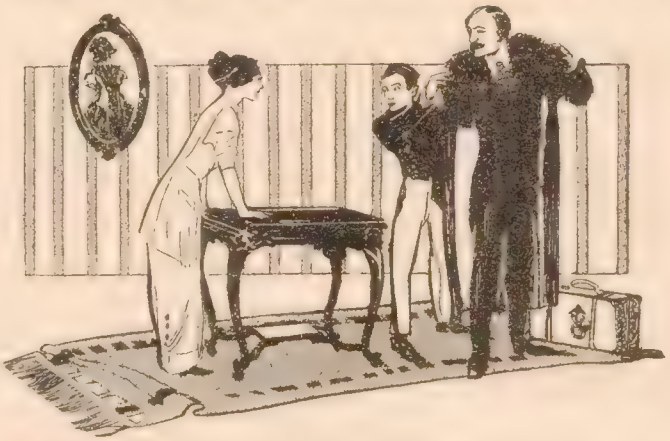
"Oh, well, it ain't so bad," he said; "you got a swell suit of clothes out of it, Jimmie. But I'll bet Bill was good and sore."

THE PATIENT LOVER.

PATRICIA hath so haughty grown,
Since she hath reached eighteen,
That, seeing her, you'd scarce have known
She once loved me so mean.
But I shall not bemoan the fate
That leaves me thus ignored;
My motto is to watch and wait
My ultimate reward.
For should she love some other swain,
To wed her would be wo;
And if she does not, then, again
She'll turn to me, I know.
When Patty reaches thirty-two,
And nearing thirty-three,
I'm pretty sure, 'twixt me and you,
She'll fix her eye on me:
For what the maids of eighteen slight,
The virtues they ignore,
Are apt to fill them with delight
When nearing thirty-four!

John Kendrick Bangs.

A Materialized Husband



by Mary Edith Griswold

MARILLA was tired. Tired of cooking surreptitiously in her little hall bedroom. Tired of looking at the cost-mark first and the quality afterward.

"In this surrounding abundance," she said to herself, "there ought to be dresses and meals and elegant rooms with big, wide beds for every one. I mean to claim mine!"

She was walking on Fifth Avenue. The short winter day was closing, and the yellow lights of the shop windows looked warm and rich.

She paused before a picture store and gazed long and ardently at a portrait of a lovely lady. The lady in the picture smiled.

"She has no ambition," mused the girl in the snow; "I think happiness comes only to those who have everything but ambition."

The jewels in another window challenged attention. "I thought to get you, too, all by my own efforts," she sighed; "but the days and nights bring only sadness and disappointment!"

The surrounding abundance displayed in the windows seemed to be mocking her, so she turned into the next cross street. The flag of the Mexican minister billowed from the second-story window of the big hotel.

In her cold fingers she still held the notes of the interview she had had with this very minister that very afternoon.

Marilla could never tell how it happened. She walked up the stone steps and into the great office.

The nonsense verse flashed across her memory.

> My feet they haul me 'round the house;
> They hoist me up the stairs;
> I only have to steer them and
> They ride me everywheres.

The girl was in a strange subjective mood when she seemed to be looking and listening to herself from a very great height.

As she went in slowly she realized that no first-class hotel would allow a woman unaccompanied to register. But in such a mood realities become easy barriers to strike down. She assumed a bored air, looked back toward the door several times as though expecting some one.

The clerk was new to his task, with a warm country heart, which had not

yet learned the guile of the world, and the delicate, weary little face of the woman who waited for him to speak to her touched him profoundly.

"My husband is lame," said the girl, "so maybe I'd better go up and look at the room first myself."

She turned and looked again in the direction of the door, feigning impatience. Her heart was beating quick with the boldness of the deception.

The young clerk felt a still stronger feeling of pity for the fragile little woman, scarce more than a girl. His eyes took in the sad, tired droop to the shoulders which is so attractive in warm, soft youth and so abhorrent when it becomes fixed habit of body and mind.

He twirled the huge register around without a word, and the girl wrote: "Mr. and Mrs. John Jones, St. Louis."

"Show the lady to No. 610," said the clerk to the bell-boy, handing him a key.

Marilla smiled, thanked him, and followed the boy.

It was a delightful room, warm and bright, with a big, wide bed in it—just the kind her tired little body had longed for.

"My husband is particular," she said to the bell-boy; "but I am sure he will like this room."

Then she gave the boy a quarter and told him to watch for a lame man and to show him up at once, as he hated hotels, and that she had already registered.

The boy saluted and retired, and Marilla was alone in the luxury of a Fifth Avenue hotel, with the piquant prospect of something happening and —oh, joy!—a night's rest in a smooth bed with fresh, immaculate sheets, light, warm bedclothes, and a pretty room to awaken in.

"I shall have one night of ease and comfort, at least," she mused, half aloud. Then she drew off her cloak and hung it up in the closet.

She went up to the mirror and looked at her reflection a long time. She was not pleased with what she saw, for she frowned. "You are beginning to show wear, Marilla," she said aloud to herself.

After that she tried the chairs. They were easy and restful. She sank back into the luxurious cushions of a big Morris chair. It held and comforted her like the strong, encircling arms of a mother.

Marilla was one of those poor, vain, little girls who longed for fame as a writer. This ambition was enthroned in her heart like a great sun in a dark firmament. She had come to New York to make her way, and her newspaper experience had taught her nothing of life—she was not ready for its truths; it had only baffled her and made her miserable.

But to-night, as she sat in the restful Morris chair in the splendid room, she felt the first dawn of a new light. By her intuition she dimly realized that fame does not come by striving for it, and that a very little thing is fame, anyhow. In her details she had met many people who had never heard of Kipling or Kitchener, and this did not make any difference to their work or their enjoyment.

Marilla was not thinking consciously; she was dreaming. Her reverie was interrupted by a loud knock at the door. She sprang up and opened it. There was the bell-boy who had brought her up, and behind him limped a tall man in a big fur overcoat.

Marilla had flung the door wide open and, without saying a word, the big man came in, followed by the boy, carrying a heavy bag.

The bell-boy was too accustomed to ushering in unwelcome husbands to notice the reception, and departed happy with a gold coin for a tip.

Left alone, the girl and the man faced each other. His eyes smiled, but it was all the encouragement he offered. Quietly he waited for her to exlain.

The silence was growing more and

more embarrassing. Finally Marilla plucked up courage to speak: "Did the boy show you up without your consent?" she asked.

"Yes," answered the man; "he seemed to be looking for me, grabbed my grip, and brought me up here without saying a word. I had to follow him to keep my grip in sight."

Marilla liked his eyes and his voice. But the feeling made it all the harder for her to explain.

But she got through with it some way—told him of her ambition, of her newspaper work, about the hall bedroom, and the longing she had felt tonight for a rest in a big, wide bed which had not been folded and crumpled up all day; told him of the deception she had practised in order to get the room, since no Fifth Avenue hotel will permit an unescorted woman to register, and that she never anticipated the coming of a lame man.

Her only fear was that the office would find out she had deceived them regarding her husband who did not materialize.

While she told him her story they had both remained standing. The man now drew off his overcoat. The girl crossed over to his side. "Let me help you," she said.

He would not relinquish the heavy coat to her slender strength, so the girl opened the door of the closet where her cloak hung. The man hung his beside it, and as he did so he contrasted the slender warmth of the girl's thin little jacket with his own otter-skins, and a feeling of compassion almost overcame him. He made no effort to tell the girl in words what he felt; but when he turned his face toward her she saw his eyes were soft and tender.

They sat down, one on either side of the little table.

"I suppose it is fair that I should tell you who I am," he said. "The tale is shorter than yours. I am a miner. I've been in Alaska for fourteen years and made my pile. I thought I'd like to come home for a—"

He broke off suddenly and looked at his watch. "Have you had supper yet?" he asked.

"No," answered the girl, looking a little frightened.

"You must know a nice place to dine, and may I presume to ask you if you will dine with me?" He put the question timidly, which made Marilla trust him.

"We can have dinner here if you wish," she said, and the man understood that the girl preferred it so.

Dining is the great diversion for people not acquainted. All men meet on the common ground of good dining. And this man and this woman, destined for each other, experienced the joy of discovering a complement in the other.

"Don't you think, John," said Marilla to her husband six weeks later, when they were sitting in the same room waiting for the bell-boy to carry down the grips to the cab, "that we owe something to the bell-boy?"

"And to the clerk," added John.

"And to the frost for making you lame," continued the girl.

"Well, I should say we owe it all to something we call luck in Alaska."

WISDOM.

THE clouds may drop down titles and estates;
Wealth may seek us, but wisdom must be sought;
Sought before all, but (how unlike all else
We seek on earth!) 'tis never sought in vain.

Anonymous.

The Log-Book

By the Editor

WHERE are the thrillers of yesterday?

Every day or so I get a letter from an old reader who bewails the loss of stories such as he read twenty years ago in THE ARGOSY, and he wants the same sort of stuff.

I know just how these readers feel, for twenty years ago or thereabouts I was thrilled myself by ARGOSY stories.

Instead of learning of the habits of Dyak headhunters, and the products of Jamaica, or bothering my head about a big chunk of pink overlaid on the map of Africa in my geography, I was really being thrilled by ARGOSY stories.

As it happened, I afterward got my geography on some of the real ground, and learned more about the Atlantic Ocean and the China Sea in one day than I ever could have learned from a ton of geographies.

But I was thrilled by THE ARGOSY in the early days, and not infrequently had to stay after school when my skill of hiding an ARGOSY behind a geography became known.

So the other day I dug around in the bound volumes of THE ARGOSY and found some of the very stories which I had read as a boy, away back in the days when it was *The Golden Argosy,* and had a ship under full sail with decks as level as a dancing-floor, coming out of the top of the cover page.

Then I discovered why we don't have any more of those stories. They are not writing them any more—any more than they are wearing crinolines. And worst of all—they don't thrill any more.

We have all changed in a quarter of a century. Most of the old writers are dead, or out of date, which is sometimes worse, and the readers have changed their ideas about what makes a good story.

Not that many of the old stories were not fine pieces of work. I am not saying, mind, that the present-day stories are better—only that they are different. And from being a boy's magazine, THE ARGOSY has developed into a magazine for old and young, yet many who read THE ARGOSY years ago still think of it as a juvenile publication.

And when we have a story which some readers do not like, the dissatisfied seem to think that story represents just what the editor likes, and think that is the only sort of story he will ever want to buy and publish.

The truth of the matter is, an editor frequently publishes a story which he does not like, but which meets with great favor among the readers, and they clamor for more of the same sort. When he publishes a story which he does like, it proves unpopular with many, so that there is always a division of opinion except in some rare cases.

And when the editor tells about a story, and says it is thrilling and well done, he is applying a standard which he thinks fits that particular story for the particular readers who will like it.

The description of a story is not for the purpose of making you like it. The story itself must win its own favor with you, and no matter how many paragraphs of praise it may carry to introduce it, you like the story or you don't, and that's an end of it.

If you buy a magazine and then feel disappointed, you have a chance of being immensely pleased with the next

issue. The editor is never pleased. Every copy that comes into his hands is a disappointment. He wishes it could have been better, and the only solace there is for him is to make a renewed effort with the next number.

So that every issue is a disappointment to the editor, and he begins a new life with the hope that the next number will see his ideal realized. But there isn't any ideal number for an editor—the ideal is only something to strive for.

Also you must remember that the stories in a single number of a magazine, good or bad as they may be, are the result of infinite labor just in the matter of selection. You ought to be thankful that you haven't had to wade through a ton or more of stories in order to get those stories.

And while you only have to read a story once, and can quit it when and where you please, the editor has to read it first to buy it, and then must put infinite labor on it before it goes to the printer, and then see it again in type in proof-sheets. So, after all, you get a lot for fifteen cents.

Wouldn't it be fine if I had, say, twenty authors, and each would write on order an ideal story in some particular vein. Suppose I could say, "Smith, write me a ripping sea story," and Smith did.

And to Brown: "'A' mystery story that will crinkle their hair, with fine characters and fine plot, and something entirely new, that will hold them until daylight and make them miss their Elevated train," and Brown would.

The other eighteen could be all working at different sorts of stories, and the editor could have what he wanted just when he wanted it.

And every month we would have a sea story as good if not better than "Treasure Island," and a love story equaling if not surpassing "The Little Minister," and a mystery story that would make the "Sign of the Four" look as interesting as a Babylonian cuneiform.

For the April number I have picked out of the fiction garden a fine book-length novel entitled

The Well Shooters

BY GEORGE WASHINGTON OGDEN

It is a tale of the oil fields of Oklahoma, and Ogden, who wrote "Home Place," a book published last fall, knows what he is writing about, knows how to write, and does. I have never seen before a good story of the oil fields — any oil fields — and I never could understand why "shooting wells" could not be as thrilling and as interesting as mining for gold.

The story opens with an old "well-shooter" engaging a young man as a helper, explaining that the business takes nerve. Then there is a woman who has a fine claim and a fine daughter, and there is mystery and intrigue and high finance and good, clean work and daring, and when it is all over you realize that you have met several human beings and know them and will remember them as long as you live.

Ogden wrote "Sheep and Sang Froid," and "One Grand Machine for to Hear," "A Forty-Four Caliber Joke," and other short stories, and you know what a genius he has for plotting and giving you characters who are alive. I always suspect that Ogden knew at some time the very people in his stories—they are portraits.

This book-length novel is the longest we have had for months, but it isn't a line too long to suit me. Incidentally, it is the sort of a story I like to read myself, along with good sea stuff and real adventure. I also trust that you will all like it, but anyway, we have

A Bout with the Man of Destiny

BY ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

an extra long novelette and a historical romance of early American days, involving an American who went to

France to negotiate with Napoleon for the purchase of the Louisiana territory.

It is just the sort of thing Terhune is best at, and instead of getting it in two parts, as you would have in the old days, you get it complete, and it is almost a book-length novel.

So the April number, with about six short stories, will be about as fine a proposition in the form of a complete magazine as you have ever had in your hands. If you can't find reading to suit you in this April number, there is certainly something wrong somewhere—it is the biggest fifteen cents' worth of fiction that has ever passed through my hands, taking it by and large, and considering the fact that it is every line complete, with not a story to be finished at some future time, leaving a mortgage on what you buy and read.

Be sure you order the April ARGOSY—I am willing to stand on it as the best number of THE ARGOSY I have ever produced. And if you like Ogden, be sure you send me a line to that effect, because I want to sign him up for another novel—and grab him for THE ARGOSY before some other magazine editor discovers what he is worth as a fiction maker.

Remember — order the complete April ARGOSY.

FROM THE ADMIRAL'S DESPATCH BAG

Many of our old friends are with us this month with glory-bes and growls, and as I have handed them out about as they came, I am not going to say much about the letters. They speak for themselves pretty well. Be sure and let me know what you think of THE ARGOSY as a complete magazine.

Missouri Has Doubts

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I must say that one of the best stories I ever read was "The Waters of Strife," in the November ARGOSY. I also want to congratulate you on printing "An Enemy Hath Done This." Why do you not publish THE ARGOSY twice a month? I have stopped reading it three times because it does not come often enough, but I always go back to it. It has been in the family for ten years, and is going to stay. I am enclosing a year's subscription. Some Doubting Thomases think the letters in the Log-Book are fakes.

F. A. WUBBENHORST.

Liberty, Missouri, R. F. D. 1.

Perhaps if all THE ARGOSY readers demand the magazine twice a month they will get it, and each number complete in each issue at that.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Georgia Girl Replies

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

For shame! Mr. Crean, don't you know that Mr. Lovecraft says it isn't correct to use "outlandish" words, and *my* dictionary doesn't show the word "lookable." However, as "Cy" came to my rescue very gallantly, and you also say "keep Jackson," I'll forgive you for using such words.

Am quite sure Mr. Lovecraft spent an awfully long time over his dictionary, but if he and the brilliant Mr. Bennett will stop a minute to think they will recall that reading magazines they don't like is not compulsory.

Let THE ARGOSY alone; can't any of you do any better than our present editor.

"GEORGIA GIRL."

Atlanta, Georgia.

* * * *

Wants Old Argosy

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I just picked up the December ARGOSY, the first I'd seen in two years, and was starting to renew old acquaintances. I read two pages, skimmed over the contents, and then put it down, feeling as if I had lost a brother.

Where, oh where, are gone the stories of yesterday? Where are the stories that made our blood tingle and kept us in a fever of excitement from one issue to another—such tales as "Land of Lost Hope" and the other thrillers?

I know I am only one of many who prefer the old way, and I for one would be willing to pay fifteen cents to have the dear old dime magazine back again. As for the big story, "The Motor Buccaneers," it looks like it is the best, from the two pages

I have read, of the bunch you have been printing. Perhaps you'll say I'm a "know it all," and ought to have a magazine to run myself, but if you print this you will convince several of my friends that this department is no fake.

C. D. MYERS.

Hendricks, West Virginia.

I hope your friends are convinced, although the letter was not printed for that purpose, but because it seemed to be a criticism from an old reader. However, from your skimming, I do not feel that you have given the new sort of stories a fair chance. Also, brother, if you were so fond of the old ARGOSY, how did you come to overlook it for two years? Why not go beyond the table of contents and see if the new writers can't thrill you?—EDITOR.

* * * *

Wants Jackson Stories

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

On reading Mr. Lovecraft's letter of criticism on Fred Jackson's works I think that he has been very unjust to Mr. Jackson personally, and also to your most entertaining magazine, for Mr. Jackson's stories are wonderful, and handled in a masterly way.

If Mr. Lovecraft wishes to display his vocabulary I wish, for the sake of Mr. Jackson's many admirers, he would exhibit it in praising, not criticizing.

If you discontinue his stories I am sure your circulation will drop down twenty-five per cent. All your stories are excellent, and none can compete with Jackson's.

CLIFFORD D. ENNIS.

282 West Delevan Street,
Buffalo, New York.

* * * *

Correction for Lovecraft

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

In the verses which I sent last October, appeared the couplet:

"Think not good rimester, that I sought
to *shew*
In my last letter, merely what I *know*."

As printed in the January Argosy, with "modernized," "simplified" or "Americanized" spelling, I see that it reads:

"Think not, good rimester, that I sought
to *shew*
In my late letter, merely what I *knew*."

I fear that this will create a wrong impression, and convey the idea that I pronounce the verb "to shew" like "shoe," or "shoo," instead of in the proper manner, riming with "sew." It seems as though if an alteration of the spelling had to be made, your compositor might have changed "shew" to "show," thus preserving both rime and sense, and making the couplet conform to that style of spelling which is used in other parts of your magazine.

As it is, three faults remain: (1) The rime is destroyed. (2) The sense of "know" is changed from present to past, and (3) "shew" remains unaltered and inharmonious with the general spelling of the verse.

I now write only to free myself from the suspicion of pronouncing "shew" to rime with "blue"; I realize that the original fault is mine, and that in writing to a magazine wherein a changed or modern form of spelling is employed, I ought to lay aside my own orthographical system and make my manuscript correspond to the usage of the magazine in question.

Any writings which I may in future inflict upon THE ARGOSY, will, I assure you, *show* none of the personal idiosyncrasies which may have characterized my past performances. I shall labor sincerely to forget the good old Johnsonian way of spelling and shall endeavor to master the patois which the modern periodical seems inclined to favor.

"With old orthography I now am thru
Since printer's devils *rime* my "shew"
with "knew";
I'll watch the glorious modern method *rize*
And rival Bennett when I criti*cize*."

Do not imagine that I fail to appreciate the space in the Log-Book which has been allotted to me, especially since you *show* by your editorial comment that you do not share my opinion in regard to Jackson.

H. P. LOVECRAFT,

598 Angell Street, Providence, R. I.

P. S. I have a design of writing a novel for the entertainment of those readers who complain that they cannot secure enough of Fred Jackson's work. It is to be entitled: "The Primal Passion, or The Heart of 'Rastus Washington."

H. P. L.

I trust that this sets you right with the readers. There wasn't any editing done to your manuscript before it went to the printers, and printers don't apologize. However, don't worry. You are always welcome in the Log-Book.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Canada Likes Dwyer

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

Let me tell you that "The City of the Unseen" is certainly a brainy piece of work on the part of its noted author, James Francis Dwyer, and I hope he will again endeavor to put as good a novel through as

he has in the December issue. Success from an ARGOSY friend and reader.

E. G. HAMEL.

623 St. John Street,
Quebec, Canada.

* * * *

Renews His Subscription

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

Please send me THE ARGOSY for one year. Members of this family have taken one or more of your publications since THE ARGOSY was a young-folks paper—and the best ever. HENRY M. SMITH.

57 Cherry Street,
Northampton, Massachusetts.

* * * *

Commends Recent Changes

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I have been a reader of THE ARGOSY for the last three years, and the only fault I have to find with it is that there is not enough of it. I like it much better since you have made the recent changes. Of course I like some stories better than others, but the good ones make up for the poor ones. MRS. NANCY E. KIRK.

R. R. 1,
LaCrosse, Washington.

* * * *

Wants Short Stories

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I see the long-story side is doing the most writing, so I am going to add my vote for the short stories. I can't threaten you with not buying it if you don't publish what I want, for my husband takes it, and I would continue to read it as long as it is THE ARGOSY, but I don't read it much, except the Log-Book, since you make the stories so long.

It is all right to cut out the continued stories, but I like a lot of short stories and one or two long ones. I don't like Fred Jackson very well. I don't expect my vote for short stories will matter much, but you have it. MRS. R. S. JOHNSON.

Yorkville, Michigan.

I assure you that your vote does count, but there seems to be a general idea that in testing the value of the short story I adopted the policy of no short stories.

For several months I have been readjusting the serials and paving the way for this complete magazine. From three serials run in small instalments, I brought the serials to an end in the February number, and in order to increase the size of the instalments I cut down the short story space. At the same time I thought it a good chance to test the value of short stories with the readers. Instead of running eight to twelve short stories, I gave the space to serials, and there were a great many readers who were satisfied to let the short stories go.

By actual count the letters have been even in voting on the question, but out of half a million readers a hundred letters could hardly be used as a basis to decide the question.

Now that the serials have been dispensed with, you shall have your full book-length novels, long novelettes, and short stories. Under this arrangement everybody should be able to find in each number the sort of stories preferred.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Protest from Texas

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I have been reading THE ARGOSY for a number of years, and there seems to be a great many unfair people, but I wish to state that I have never read a story in THE ARGOSY which I have not enjoyed very much. My favorites are Edgar Franklin, H. Bedford-Jones, W. E. Schutt, and W. R. Foran, and any one who cannot appreciate stories by these authors must have an unbalanced mind. Thanking you for more stories by the above-named authors, and assuring you that I like THE ARGOSY as it now stands, I am, K. D. GARVER.

2804 Turney Avenue,
Dallas, Texas.

With the exception of Franklin, the authors named are newcomers to the staff of THE ARGOSY, and I like to know that old readers find them satisfactory. However, those who do not like the work of some of these writers are certainly entitled to their opinions. And the best way to get more stories by your favorite authors is to write to me about them.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Criticizes Fishing Story

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I have been reading THE ARGOSY for a long time, and in my estimation it is one of the best fiction publications on the market. I find your Log-Book very interesting indeed, and like to read the opinions of other readers. I think the worst story I ever read was Frank Williams's "Scud o' the Banks." Living as I do in the "Gloucester of Canada," a story of this nature

should appeal particularly to me. The author seems to have very little knowledge of the subject, and in places it is almost ludicrous. I hope THE ARGOSY will maintain the same standard as it has at present.

Lunenburg Club, H. R. AUNBURG.
Lunenburg, Nova Scotia.

It is a well-known fact that people who read stories about their own business or profession are always dissatisfied with such stories. That is to be expected, but does not excuse errors on the part of an author. All who write sea stories are not sailors, but it is my humble opinion that they should be. What to an expert in anything would be a glaring fault, does not matter much to the general reader, and for a few small errors in a story, the reader can get a great many things that are true and a great deal of valuable information.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Canada for Jackson

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I have been reading THE ARGOSY for years, and I am a strong Jackson supporter. In fact, I like nearly all your authors. So far I have not found a really dull number, although I have read a few stories that did not interest me. Unlike our friend, "The Rhode Island Scholar and Critic" (H. P. Lovecraft), I did not expect to get five dollars' worth of reading for fifteen cents. Bring on Jackson as often as you can. W. J. THOMPSON.

155 Nassau Street,
Winnipeg, Canada.

I have an historical romance of the early days of Canada which will undoubtedly please Canadians as well as our American readers. Hope you will like the complete ARGOSY.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Praises Bedford-Jones

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

Though the stories are generally good, there sometimes appears in THE ARGOSY a story indicating strong dramatic ability in the author. This is the case with "The Waters of Strife," in your November issue. He starts off with quick, sure, confident strokes, and goes through with a rush—a feat accomplished by inspiration alone. He stops just where he has said all, and his pen is not only powerful, but quick. It is Poesque in treatment, and with all its length it is painted with a few deep, vivid strokes. The towering spirits and titanesque conflicts of the heroic characters resemble the grand elemental simplicity of Scandinavian mythology. Never, perhaps, except in such fiction was an earthly spot ever blessed, or cursed rather, with the presence and stern conflict of three such marble-hearted, bronze-souled beings as *Godwin, Westman,* and *Sanza,* to say nothing of *Betty* and the score or two inferior characters, who are as firm and unyielding as the coral foundations beneath them; as hard, grim, and stern as the bedrock of their fatalistic philosophy. Give us some more of the same stuff. W. BATES.

Elk City, Oklahoma.

* * * *

Hocking Story Pleased

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I am a constant reader of THE ARGOSY and think it is the best magazine published. "An Enemy Hath Done This," by Joseph Hocking, was a fine story. I always get anything Fred Jackson writes. Keep up the good work, Fred; you keep us from getting lonesome. MRS. MAMIE GREGORY.

Twenty-Sixth Street,
Portland, Oregon.

* * * *

Likes Adventure Tales

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I want to thank you for putting out the greatest adventure magazine that I have ever read. Your stories can't be beat. My favorite authors are Bedford-Jones and Bertram Lebhar. The first thing I read in THE ARGOSY is the Log-Book. I think it is great. "The Gate of Farewell" is a wonderfully stirring story. That is the kind of adventure story I like. I don't care much for *Hawkins.* I think your new plan is great. When one has an ARGOSY an hour goes like five minutes.

HENRY LEMMIN.

Colby, Wisconsin.

* * * *

Voice from Georgia

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I like your breezy way and THE ARGOSY you are getting out. What do all the kickers expect for fifteen cents? If they don't want to read Fred Jackson, or anybody else, there is fifteen cents worth in almost any story in THE ARGOSY. I don't read Jackson myself, although he is a good writer, but I am strong on the adventure stuff, and there is enough on hand in each issue to keep me going.

Tell that guy who says the people who read *Hawkins* ought to be in a madhouse,

that the bughouse sharps say it is the people who never laugh who fill the asylums. I think you ought to give us two or three good, snappy short stories in each issue so we poor fellows with our noses to the grindstone can finish a story without going twenty-four hours before finding out whether the hero was eaten alive by cannibals or met the more horrible fate of marrying the fair heroine whom he rescued.

My favorite authors in the order named are: A. P. Terhune, H. Bedford-Jones, James Francis Dwyer, Captain W. R. Foran, William Wallace Cook, Jim Fellom, Johnston McCulley. JAMES WELLS,
"The Printer Poet."

Dalton, Georgia.

There are going to be plenty of short stories, novelettes, and book-length novels under the new arrangement of having each number complete.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Your Request Granted

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

Please find enclosed fifteen cents, for which send me the latest ARGOSY, as I cannot get one in this town, and I can't do without it. Hurry and give us a novel by the author of "Taming Fierce Elton."

ERNEST L. ARTHUR.

Edgefield, South Carolina.

As this number contains a novel by the author of "Taming Fierce Elton," I feel that your request has been promptly attended to. Hope you like "Mesquite Ranch."—EDITOR.

* * * *

Congratulates Fred Jackson

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

In reading the Log-Book in January I note several criticisms regarding the short stories, the kind of stories now being published, and, last, but not least, Mr. H. P. Lovecraft's "bee-u-ti-ful" poem.

I have been reading THE ARGOSY for ten years, and the magazine has always been good. I have yet to find a better number than the January issue. Your idea of putting in the two-part novels and cutting down the short stories is fine, and I believe, as you stated, that if the matter was put to a vote, three-fourths of THE ARGOSY family would stand pat on the cutting down of the short stories.

Regarding the gentleman who stated that he thought THE ARGOSY was going to the dogs, or words to that effect, what does he want for fifteen cents—a Carnegie library? I think several of the writers of the letters in the January issue have not recovered from their Christmas celebrations.

Of course there are some stories that I do not like. However, it is possible that this same story might please the other five hundred thousand readers, and I certainly do not see how any one can growl over THE ARGOSY.

Mr. Lovecraft must feel better since he got rid of his "Mary had a little lamb" effort.

However, if a man can be judged by the stories he writes, Mr. Jackson, to use the vernacular of the day, is "some" man. I consider him one of the best writers THE ARGOSY has on its staff, and I feel certain that Mr. Lovecraft had better thank his stars that his disposition is expressed in letter form and not personally.

Congratulate Mr. Jackson for me, please, on his stories, from one who has possibly more books *on* his book-case than Mr. Lovecraft has perused in his career, although they may not be "high-brow" caliber.

H. M. FISHER.

191 East Pine Street,
Atlanta, Georgia.

* * * *

Resents a Critic

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I have been a reader of THE ARGOSY for ten years and always enjoy going through the Log-Book, but it makes me sore to see W. H. Howard's letter. Instead of being sore at THE ARGOSY I think he has a grouch at himself. I suppose he considers "Their Honeymoon Eclipse," "Ambushed," "Taming Fierce Elton," and "Easy Money" poor reading. Hope there will be a joke or two in the next number for Howard.

S. R. BRADY.

Astoria, Illinois.

* * * *

Saves Up Serials

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I have been a reader of THE ARGOSY for ten years and have not missed an issue. I do not see how the magazine could be improved unless you were to cut out the serials and short stories entirely. The serials I never read until I have the complete story.

I was much interested in "The City of the Unseen," although it was not as good as some that have appeared in the last few months. In my judgment the best story

ever in THE ARGOSY was "Loosing the Tempest." The only bad one was "The Shooting at Big D," and I have read them all. What has become of *Hawkins?* Can't you run him in occasionally? Give us more stories of the sea and adventure in out-of-the-way places, but few love stories. THE ARGOSY is all right, and by all odds the best fiction magazine published.

N. B. SNYDER.

North Holston, Virginia.

As you see, we have cut the serials out. As to the short stories, I am going to make sure that they are the best money can buy. As to *Hawkins,* I haven't made up my mind whether to let him come back—I am afraid he is in the discard.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Praises Lovecraft's Poetry

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

The good genius that prompted you to publish Albert Payson Terhune's story, "The Man Who Shivered," deserves the gratitude of every short-story lover. It is truly admirable. I have followed the Jackson discussion with interest. H. P. Lovecraft, in his verse *à la* Dunciad, knows what he is talking about. Pope himself couldn't have done better. Give us more of it, H. P. L.

ROY M. GROVER.

52 Quinby Street,
Watertown, Massachusetts.

* * * *

Likes New Policy

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I wish to say that I think your new policy is very good. Give us a book-length novel, a novelette, and a couple of two-part novels and I cannot see why anybody should be dissatisfied. Personally, I don't like to wait several months to finish a story.

I think Fred Jackson is a very good writer, but I enjoy H. Bedford-Jones's stories, as they have more vim in them, especially "The Waters of Strife." I hope you stick to the plan of giving us fewer short stories and more large instalments of serials.

L. C. AUTEN.

Paris, France.

I hope you will find the complete magazine an improvement over even the two-part novel idea.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Can't Miss Argosy

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

My latest copy of THE ARGOSY has failed to arrive, and as I am unwilling to miss a single copy of this splendid magazine, please send me another.

DR. WILLIAM T. HERRING.

Iola, Florida.

* * * *

Here Comes a Sailor

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

Ship ahoy. Here is a call from Davy Jones's Locker. I have been reading THE ARGOSY for seven years, and, believe me, it is the only magazine. I like all the stories, but "The City of the Unseen" and "Taming Fierce Elton" I had to read over again just for luck, they were so good.

V. B. WOLLAM.

Seaman, U. S. S. Dorothea,
Cleveland, Ohio.

Hope we don't have any sea stories by authors who don't know seven bells from a boatswain's whistle.—EDITOR.

* * * *

Seventy-Three

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

I'm just a country jake with enough education to read and hold down a telegraph job on the Pennsy, but I know when I get a good story. The engineers wouldn't toot their whistles if they knew how much joy I get out of THE ARGOSY. I thought "The Third Act" was the best I have ever read. I take off my hat to Bedford-Jones, whose "Waters of Strife" was great. Sometimes I stay at the office until two o'clock in the morning and beat the third trick operator out of his ARGOSY. "An Enemy Hath Done This" got me going. Let us have less short stories, as I forget them five minutes after I read them, unless it is something humorous like "Sheep and Sang-Froid," by George Washington Ogden. That hit my funny spot all right.

W. A. ELIA.

R. F. D. No. 6,
Winamac, Indiana.

* * * *

Wants Argosy Weekly

EDITOR, ARGOSY:

Keep the good work up. You are certainly getting out some magazine. I wish it came every week instead of once a month. I like all your authors except Fred Jackson. I like good, red-blooded stories such as "Out of Algiers," by Bedford-Jones. I just finished reading "The Secret War" and thought it fine.

GEORGE WEATHERBY.

Salem, New Jersey.

The snug "hug" of ideal heating

When neighbors drop in unexpectedly, or the dressmaker comes to demand a fitting, or when you yourself return from a long shopping trip, it is the one biggest feature of the home, immediately the threshold is crossed, to be instantly enveloped in the genial, cozy atmosphere of radiator heating. It has in it the snug hug of hospitality and home cheer—the heat which puts quick welcome into the home—the heat that wins such enthusiastic praises from everybody for

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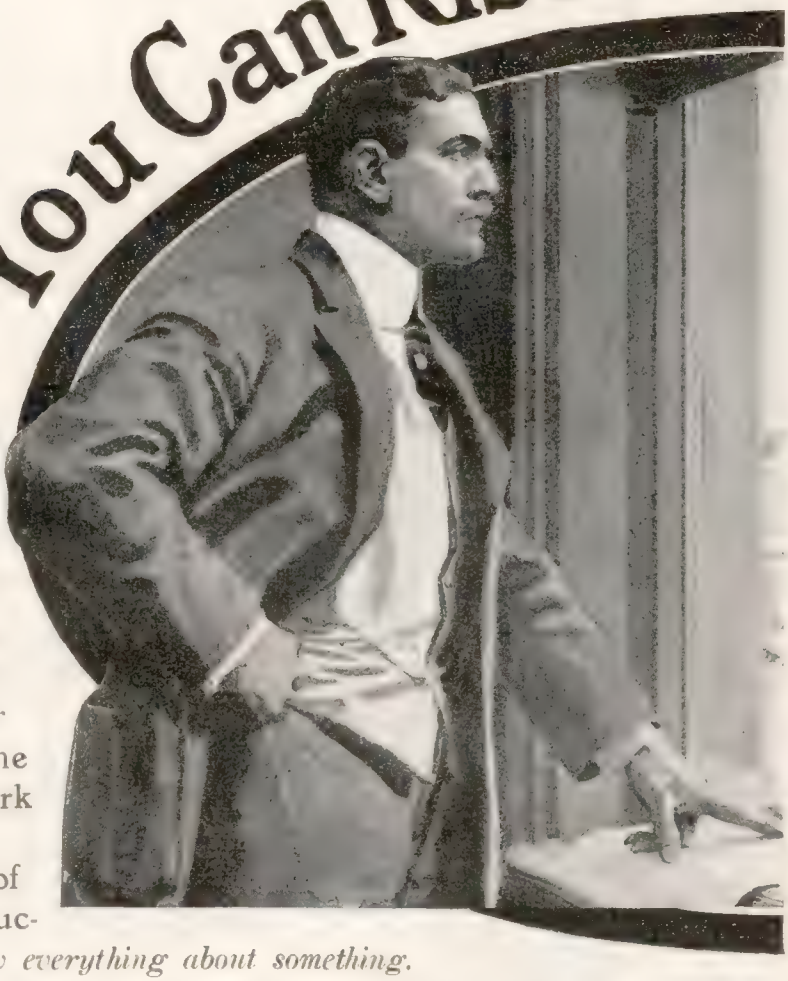

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Building Contractor	Advertising
Architectural Draftsman	Commercial Illustrating
Structural Engineer	Industrial Designing
Concrete Construction	Commercial Law
Mechan. Engineer	Automobile Running
Mechanical Draftsman	Teacher
Refrigeration Engineer	English Branches
Civil Engineer	Good English for Every One
Surveyor	Agriculture
Mine Superintendent	Poultry Farming
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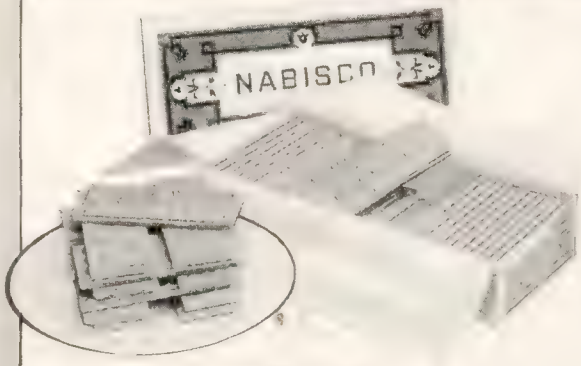

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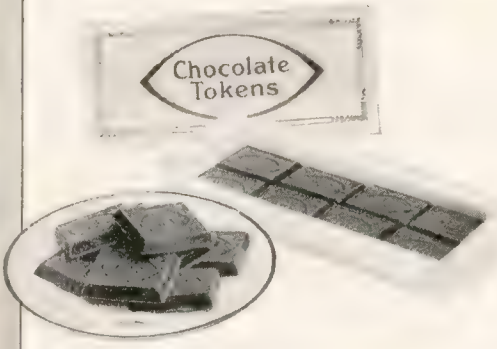

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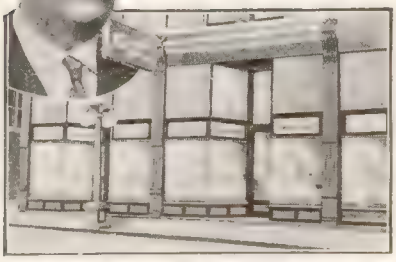
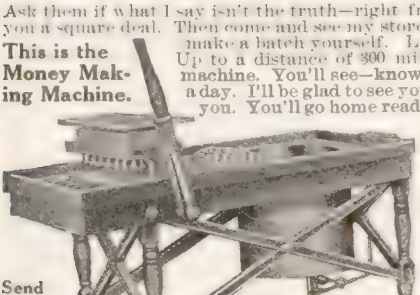


Wouldn't you like to be proprietor of a money making business? Once I was just a struggling candy maker. The profits from Crispettes, the new, delicious popcorn confection built this big business for me. The very same proposition that made me, should do the same for you. **Start in the Crispette Business for yourself.** Build a business of your own as I did. Get a window—a small store—a cozy nook where the rent is low. Keep **all** the profits. I'll teach you the Crispette business—tell you how to succeed—show you how to make Crispettes by my special secret formula. I'll do it right here in Springfield—personally or by mail. But the thing for you to do is to

Come to See Me At My Expense.

Don't say you're coming. Just drop in quietly. Call on any banker or merchant. Ask them about Long—about my store—my crispette business. Ask them if what I say isn't the truth—right from the shoulder. Look into my reputation. See if folks think I'll give you a square deal. Then come and see my store—see that it's just like the picture. See the machine. See crispettes made make a batch yourself. Learn the business. Get my pointers on how to succeed. Up to a distance of 300 miles I'll pay all your traveling expenses, if you buy a machine. You'll see—know—learn everything. It's simple—easy. Won't take you a day. I'll be glad to see you—glad to show you the store and have a good talk with you. You'll go home ready to make more money than you ever made in your life.

This is the Money Making Machine.



Send For Free Book

Every Nickel You Take in Nets You Almost Four Cents Profit.

Think of it! Think of the fortunes made in 5 cent pieces. It's one business in a hundred. Everybody likes crispettes—children—parents—old folks. One sale always means two—two means four. So it goes. It's a great business. I found it so—so should you. **Send for my big free book "How to make money in the Crispette Business"**—48 pages illustrated complete information and story of how I built my business. Read it and then come to Springfield.

W. Z. LONG, 830 High Street, Springfield, O.

This is a recent picture of the man who made $1500 in one month with a Long Crispette machine, in a store window.

Hartman Will Trust You
Requires No References
Asks No Advance Payment

Remarkable Bargain Sale

Now is the time to furnish—to get the rug, rocker, refrigerator or any of those other home-furnishings you've been needing so long. Never has this great House of Hartman, or anyone else, been able to equal these truly remarkable values. The importance of this great Price-Smashing Sale of Guaranteed Dependable Quality Home Furnishings, cannot be over estimated.

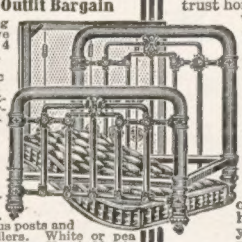
No. 0E712—Warswick Brussels Rug Bargain

Exceedingly effective semi-oriental medallion design, red center, seamless, closely woven worsted yarn, fast colors; standard 9x12 size, combination colorings, green, red and tan, fully guaranteed to wear. Price **$9.75** **75c Per Month**

No. 7D286—Hartman's Refrigerator Bargain

A Model, Sanitary Refrigerator, Gray Enamel Exterior. White Enamel Interior. Easily kept clean. Rounded corners, lift out ice chamber, splendid drain, best cooling radiation. Best hard wood veneers, trimmed with real nickel. Guaranteed. Size 43 in. high 24 in. wide 16 ins. deep. Holds 65 lbs. ice Price only **$12.75** **$1 Monthly**

No. 3F714—Complete Bed Outfit Bargain



Consisting of massive iron bed, 4 ft. 6 in. wide; 40 lb. elastic top fibre filled mattress, durable ticking, and all angle iron springs, spiral spring supports. Bed has 1 1-8 in. continuous posts and heavy fillers. White or pea green enamel or Vernis Martin Price, **$8.75** **75c Per Month**

50c Per Month

No. 1D332—Hartman's Big Rocker Bargain

Large, comfortable rocker, selected hardwood finished American quarter-sawed oak, upholstered Imperial leather. Strongly built, stout runners. The carvings on posts and runners are unusually deep and beautiful—unique designs. Back tufted, handsomely ruffled all around edge. Seat set over full strong construction, handsome ruffled front. Our bargain price for this remarkable rocker only **$3.65**

No. 0E444—Go-Cart

New one-motion collapsible go-cart. Instantaneous motion easily folds cart as shown. All steel construction covered with Imperial Leather. Has 3 bow hood, half inch rubber tires. Most remarkable bargain at **$4.95** **50c Per Month**

No. 5F466—Stunning Colonial Library Table

This beautiful library table of selected hardwood finished, American quarter-sawed oak. Thoroughly substantial in construction. Expertly finished. High gloss, hand rubbed polish. Large 28x42 top. Big roomy drawer. Base has artistically shaped feet. Striking Colonial pattern. Is right in style. Value cannot be duplicated under $13 to $16. Our price only **$7.65** **75c Per Month**

No. 7F460—Hartman's Ball Bearing Washer

Tub of eight shirt capacity, bottom and sides corrugated, made of selected cypress, known to withstand effect of lye, soap and acids. Heavily varnished. Lid has detachable hinges, easily removed. Tub supported on heavy legs, strongly braced. Improved wringer attachment securely fastened. Ball bearing connections makes the work so easy that it is a pleasure to wash with this machine. Four-pronged dasher, large and strong, cannot split or crack. Remarkable value at **$5.75** **50c Per Month**

Furniture Stoves, Ranges Dishes Jewelry
Carpets Refrigerators Clocks Curtains
Rugs Silverware Go-Carts Springs
Bedding Mattresses Sewing Machines

No Need of Meagerly Furnished Homes

Not only the necessities of home-furnishing, but the comforts and even the luxuries, found here-to-fore only in the homes of the rich and prosperous have been brought within the reach of even those of very limited means by the remarkably low prices and most liberal Easy Payment Plan offered by the famous House of Hartman. You should send today for the Big, Special, FREE Hartman Credit Bargain Book and find out for yourself. It shows everything in home-furnishings, including a marvelous assortment of carpets, rugs and draperies in color, patterns and designs photographed from the originals. It's like bringing into your own home an enormous stock of home-furnishings, many times the size of largest city store, including

Your Credit Good at Hartman's

To the millions of honest home-lovers, everywhere, Hartman says: "I will trust you—just as I am trusting over a million of other home-lovers who are now buying their household needs from Hartman." Hartman's transactions with you are strictly confidential, no references are asked—no embarrassment. Your neighbors need not know your business—you'll like the Hartman plan when you know all about it.

Hartman Makes Easiest Terms

No matter who you are or where you live, your credit is good at Hartman's. No matter how small your income Hartman meets your requirements. We trust home-lovers everywhere on an open charge account without any red tape whatever. There are no extra charges, no mortgages to sign, no interest to pay—nor do we ask for any security. The Hartman modern credit system is free from ALL objectionable features. With long-time credit as easy to get as it is from Hartman there is no reason for anyone, even of limited income, to live in a meagerly furnished home.

During this big sale you can order any of these special advertised bargains without sending us any advance payment.

30 Days' Free Examination

Every Hartman Bargain must actually sell itself on its own merit, after you see it in your own home. At the end of a month return anything you do not find to be perfectly satisfactory. Hartman refunds your money—including freight.

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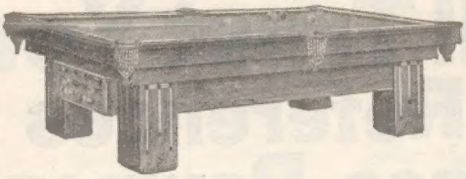

Yes, Billiards!

The Pastime for Leisure Hours at Home

The time has come when the Billiard Table fills just as important a place in the home as the piano. Billiards is a stimulating, interesting game of skill in which young and old may indulge to their hearts' content with the greatest pleasure and profit.

The Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company, oldest and largest of all Billiard Table concerns, now offers a complete line of Home Billiard and Pocket-Billiard Tables at very attractive prices.

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The Home Billiard Table With the Fast Cushions

Superb creation in genuine Mahogany. Fitted with celebrated Monarch Cushions which have the highest possible speed obtainable with absolute accuracy of angle. Slate Bed covered with finest imported Billiard Cloth. Concealed drawer to hold Playing Outfit. Sizes 3 x 6; 3½ x 7; 4 x 8. Other Brunswick styles include the popular "Convertible" Billiard and Pocket-Billiard Tables, which serve also as Dining Tables, Library Tables or Davenports.

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We are pleased to extend the most liberal terms of payment on any size or style of Brunswick Billiard Table you may select. You will find it true economy to buy a *real* billiard table, rather than a mere makeshift.

Free Outfit Included

Price of each table includes a high-grade Playing Outfit—Cues, Balls, Bridge, Rack, Chalk, Assorted Cue Tips, Markers, Brush, Lightning Cue Clamps, Wrench, Spirit Level, Cover, book on "How to Play," etc., etc., etc.

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The Brunswick-Balke-Collender Co., (214)
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Please send me the free color-illustrated book—

"Billiards—The Home Magnet"

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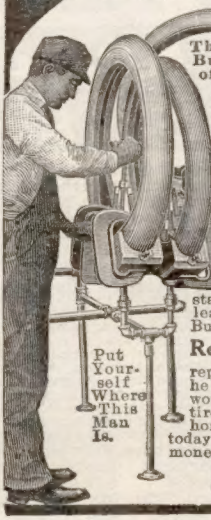
$250.00 A MONTH REPAIRING TIRES

Be first to enter this new big paying business in your town. Open your pockets. Let the dollars pour in. Act quick. Automobile business growing fast **Each Auto Sold Means More Tires to Mend.** Enormous field for tire repairing. Punctures and blowouts are common. Tires need retreading and vulcanizing. Something going wrong all the time. Thousands forced to buy new tires because they can't get old ones fixed. Think of the old bicycle days—repair shops on every corner—all making money—busy day and night. Autos make same proposition over again—only ten times bigger and better. Users of Haywood Tire Repair Plants are making big money. Johnson, Tex., writes, **"I made as high as $18 profit in a day."** Another man who bought a plant September, 1911, writes he has **cleared over $3,000.00.** Be the first to start. Experience unnecessary. You learn quick. Simply follow directions. Business comes fast and easy.

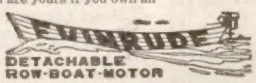


Repair Tires at Home Young men!—repair father's tires—get the money he pays garage man. Get the neighbors work. **Auto owners**—repair your own tires—save money—have outfits for home use. Anyhow investigate. Send today for catalogue explaining wonderful money making possibilities in this field.

HAYWOOD TIRE & EQUIPMENT CO.,
670 Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Ind.

ENJOY MOTOR-BOATING WITH ANY ROWBOAT OR CANOE

All the pleasures of motor-boating are yours. The fishing parties, the camping trips with the work left out, the moonlight rides on the water—all are yours if you own an



It attaches to any rowboat in less than one minute, and also attaches to canoes, duck boats, house boats, rafts or odd shaped craft of all kinds. Speed with rowboat 8 miles an hour; with canoe nearly 12; may be slowed down so that trolling becomes a pleasure instead of hard work. The "Evinrude" possesses exclusive features not found in other marine motors. Among them is the

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which is on the 1914 models. No batteries to wear out. The motor weighs about 50 pounds and carries like a satchel; is so simple that women and children operate it. Every motor guaranteed by the largest manufactory of rowboat motors in the world. Yearly capacity 60,000 "Evinrudes."

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Missing Page

Inside back cover

It's There

But You Can't Find It That Way

Every cup of coffee contains a drug, caffeine, which forces the heart beyond the natural beat and does various other things to people.

Some can stand it.

Many cannot.

If you suffer from any ailments arising from a nervous system out of balance, look carefully at the Coffee. Weak eyes, heart, digestion or kidneys are common coffee troubles. Rheumatism is frequently caused by it. Nervous prostration is one of the many ugly children of Coffee.

Try the easy experiment of leaving it off ten days or two weeks and use well-made Postum. If you feel a gradual return of health, stick to it, and grow back into a well man or woman again. It pays to be well, and it's more fun than most anything on this earth.

"There's a Reason" for POSTUM

Postum now comes in two forms.

Regular Postum — must be well boiled.

Instant Postum — doesn't require boiling. It is a soluble powder, a scant teaspoonful of which dissolved in a cup of hot water makes a delicious beverage instantly!

—grocers everywhere sell both kinds.

THE BUDGET PRESS, NEW YORK